

**(Im)mobility, Digital Technologies and Transnational Spaces of Belonging:**

**An Ethnographic Study of Somali Migrants in Cape Town**

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## ***Abstract***

This study draws on ethnographic research with Somali migrants in Cape Town to explore the intersection of (im)mobility, physical and virtual space and new configurations of belonging in a digital world. It investigates the gendered politics and ethics of being and belonging in a world of mobility and migration where digital technologies have become significant to social organisation and sociality, both within and across borders. The dissertation presented probes the reasons why policies and technologies that were expected to create more fluid movement and more open societies have been met with the hardening of national borders, and a parallel rise in global trends towards anti-immigration, control of identities and fear of difference, which have manifested in South African society. This dissertation concludes that a combination of legal frameworks related to migrants and refugees, public infrastructures and cultural factors exert a strong influence on Somali migrants' access to rights in South Africa, identity and social reproduction, and transnational belonging.

Social exclusion may be a catalyst for Somali migrants' transnational engagements in which digital technologies are a significant driver of heightened group consciousness and belonging. In many ways, the rise of online social networks and information capital have taken off among Somali migrants because of their tremendous social organising power in the absence of formal institutions, limited political and social belonging in host countries, and in the context of vastly integrated transnational diaspora networks which sustain economic and social lives. As such, Somali migrants live at the margins of (im)mobility – in-between physical and virtual spaces – leading to the navigation of “frontier-ness”, challenging taken-for-granted identities. While most studies about mobility and migration focus on citizenship and belonging from a legalistic or deterministic standpoint – solidifying prescribed notions of “Somaliness” or other factors of identity affiliated with nationhood or citizenship – there is a need to dig deeper to understanding what it means to navigate and, indeed perform, belonging via gendered technologies of mobility.

Participation in social life through online networks and in transnational spaces often challenges common assumptions that identity is necessarily linked to particular places. However, this research simultaneously demonstrates the ways in which nations and borders continue to be emphasised in a world of flows. Contrary to popular assumptions that the internet is transnational, borderless and disassociated with place, this research argues that nation-places – enacted through hubs and nodes – continue to be salient. In this context, it is important to understand how digital technologies intersect with identity, culture and social

norms offline and online among diverse communities to support new configurations of agency and empowerment in an increasingly digital world.

In this light, this dissertation looks at how digital technologies, such as the internet, emerge as a force of mobility, situated in contrast to stark forces of immobility which seek to limit the movement of people. Not only does the internet close distance between geographies, it also closes distances in access to information and networks of support, such as financial assistance, social capital and caregiving. Experiences of mobility (offline and online) have been both empowering and liberating. However, mobility is also circumscribed and limited by new forms of social control and manipulation at all levels of society. Despite the profoundly transnational and borderless context of the internet, “traditional” cultural frameworks and identities, such as nationality and gender, continue to be salient markers of online identity, just as they are offline. This study argues that digital technologies are culturally constituted frontier spaces characterised by various layers of (im)mobility through which belonging is navigated and performed.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction: The Mobility–Immobility Paradox and Belonging in a Digital World**

This research draws on an ethnographic study with Somali migrants in Cape Town, South Africa to explore the intersection of (im)mobility, physical and virtual space, and new configurations of belonging in an increasingly digital world. It investigates the gendered politics and ethics of being and belonging in a world of mobility and migration where digital technologies have become significant to social organisation and sociality, both within and across borders. The dissertation presented probes the reasons why technologies that were expected to create more fluid movement and more open societies have been met with policies and practices that encourage the hardening of national borders, and a parallel rise in global trends towards anti-immigration, control of identities, fear of mobility and an obsession with confining difference (Appadurai 1998, 2008). These trends are apparent in South African society (Hickel, 2014; Crush & Ramachandran, 2010; Sharp, 2008; Sichone, 2008; Steinberg, 2008; Nyamnjoh, 2006). New technologies such as social media that give citizens new avenues of voice, power and mobility in an era of globalisation have become ideological battlegrounds, influencing identity politics and spheres of belonging. By identity I refer to ascribed and achieved group membership to social categories associated with belonging. The intersection of these trends, particularly the role of digital technologies in the context of Somali mobility in South Africa, is an area that has not been widely investigated and/or ethnographically substantiated.

The study has been conceptualised in the context of significant geopolitical changes related to both migration and technology that are sweeping the world. These include public debates centred on the “refugee crisis” (De Haas, 2012; Triandafyllidou, 2018; Krzyzanowski et al, 2018) and the role of the internet in democracy and civic participation (Oyedemi, 2015 Mossberger et al, 2008). Accelerated mobility is a common feature of society today, but it has become juxtaposed by a simultaneous rise in anti-immigration sentiments and generalised fear of difference, not least in countries peopled by multiple waves of migration in the past, and that have for long been associated with a cosmopolitan “melting pot” disposition. This dichotomy of (im)mobility has become particularly pronounced in the contemporary political landscape with large-scale migrant and refugee movements in Europe and Trump’s zero-tolerance policy on the Mexican border, policies of family separation and the banning of refugees from several Muslim countries in the United States. Digital media and online channels have unveiled the widespread extent of such anti-immigrant sentiments and intolerance of perceived cultural, religious, ethnic and racial difference. Such “differences” are



created and reinforced by a politically motivated discourse of securitisation, border management and fear of the “Other”. As explored further in chapter four, anti-immigrant sentiments are driven by political, economic and social factors, leading to social upheaval around control of resources, protection of moral power and social and cultural reproduction (Hickel, 2014).

This study took place in a historical period twenty years after the dawn of democracy in South Africa – a period in which human rights, freedom of mobility and association, and media freedom were institutionalised; and South Africa opened its borders to regional migration. During South Africa’s transition to liberal democracy under Nelson Mandela’s leadership, the country was notably referred to as the “Rainbow Nation”, symbolic of the idea of “unity within diversity” that was fostered in a delicate, yet vital time of nation-building and political and economic transformation. However, subsequent decades saw the growth of a virulent politics of exclusion at many levels of government and society, coupled with contestations about who belongs in the country (and what credibility informs their place as citizens and nationals), has led to systemic discrimination against non-nationals and “outsiders” (Landau, 2011). This is oftentimes expressed through claims of autochthony, as societies seek to establish an irrefutable, primordial right to belong (Geschiere, 2009). Autochthony refers to the idea of “being born from the soil” – it is a deeply rooted concept representing the idea of “authentic” belonging and “hierarchies of autochthons”, informed by the region one comes from, class, race, ethnicity, gender, etc. In the case of South Africa, autochthony often manifests itself through the socially tenuous and isolated positioning of foreign migrants, as well as internally by the hierarchies of being a national and a citizen. Trends towards violence against non-nationals demonstrates the “constant search for the exclusion of strangers” (Geschiere, 2009:25) that takes place as a trend towards autochthony, driven by economic pressures, contestations around access to resources and political struggles to define belonging in terms of economic status, national identity and local inclusion.

This politics of exclusion became a prominent concern for South Africa in May 2008 when violent riots erupted in township areas of Johannesburg, targeting non-national residents from other African countries including Mozambique, Somalia and Zimbabwe (Landau, 2011:1). Unrest spread across the country with similar outbreaks of violence occurring in two other major cities – Cape Town and Durban – both of which host large migrant populations. During this time, a total of over 60 people were murdered, close to 700 wounded and over 100,000 displaced (Landau, 2011:11), leading to the official recognition of a crisis of xenophobia in the country. Some have insisted pointedly that such violence is evidence of “Afrophobia”, pointing out that many non-nationals “have over the years settled in South Africa and were readily

accepted as ‘white’” (Koenane & Maphunye, 2015:9). As Jonny Steinberg – author of *A Man of Good Hope*, a creative non-fictional account of a Somali male migrant in Cape Town – has pointed out, the “xenophobic riots” constituted “the first sustained nationwide eruption of social unrest since the beginning of South Africa’s democratic era in 1994” (Steinberg, 2008). The experience of violence has become a daily reality for many and, Somalis in particular, as evidenced by the frequent looting of Somali-owned shops and the killing of shopkeepers across the country. Landau and Freemantle have referred to this as “mob justice that’s based on nationality” (Landau & Freemantle, 2014). Violence targeting foreign shopkeepers in Soweto, Johannesburg, in August 2018 was instigated by accusations of foreign-owned businesses selling counterfeit and expired consumable products. This accusation was rejected by Somali shopkeepers, and has been under investigation by the South African Human Rights Commission (Mabasa, 2018, ENCA, 2018).

In South Africa, attacks and violations of economic, social and political rights are directed overwhelmingly at citizens and refugees from other African countries. However, the fact that exclusion and discrimination also impacts marginalised communities and South African migrant labourers from other national provinces suggests that the concept of the “outsider” or “foreigner” – often expressed offensively as *makwerekwere* – is increasingly employed as a form of discrimination towards anyone seen not to “belong”, or to belong tenuously (Neocosmos, 2006). Confined boundaries of inclusion, as embedded in the term *makwerekwere*, is explained by Francis Nyamnjoh, in his book *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa*, as being based on, “Hierarchies among nationals as insiders and between nationals and non-nationals in Africa, even where citizenship is granted to mobile outsiders.” Nyamnjoh explains, “It is not enough to carry official documentations of belonging and wave the national flag of a given country; one must be seen to belong by hard-core or bona fide blood-and-umbilical-cord insiders who arrogate to themselves the prerogative of ultimate legitimizers of belonging” (Nyamnjoh, 2016:17). Claims for belonging are made within the framework of the nation, and are based on a range of identity factors including race, religion, ethnicity, gender, clan or language. Jonathan Klaaren notes that in the violent riots of May 2008, one third of the victims were South African nationals, attacked because of their residential status (Klaaren, 2011:140). “Outsiders”, both obvious and discreet, are increasingly perceived as a threat to the possibilities for retribution after years of apartheid injustice. This is particularly so in the context of a culture of impunity, (especially exemplified by corruption among politicians in high office as well as state functionaries), inadequate service delivery, poor living conditions in informal settlements and rising unemployment levels (Stats SA, 2018).

A report produced by the South African Human Rights Commission investigated the reasons for the eruption of public violence against non-nationals in South Africa in 2008. The report suggests that targeted violence erupted due to several factors including: impunity and failure to maintain rule of law; competition for livelihoods and community resources; stereotypes about foreigners, including a lack of knowledge about the rights of non-nationals; and weakness in South Africa's immigration regime. Critically, the nature and reactions of grassroots leadership structures – their reactions to diversity coupled with imploding frustrations about inadequate service delivery and poor living conditions in informal settlements – may have been a tipping point leading to defects in the rule of law (South African Human Rights Commission, 2010:22).

In the absence of official data on violence against non-nationals from the South African Police Service or the national statistics bureau, reported cases are tracked by the African Centre for Migration and Society's Xenowatch project (African Centre for Migration and Society, 2017a). According to data recorded by Xenowatch, attacks against foreign nationals in South Africa have continued to occur since 2008 despite efforts by the government and non-governmental organisations to counter xenophobia and build social cohesion in the aftermath of the 2008 attacks. Between January 2015 and January 2017 across South Africa "nearly 70 people have died, over 100 have been assaulted, close to 600 shops have been looted and over 10,000 people have been displaced due to xenophobic incidents" (African Centre for Migration and Society, 2017b). In March 2017, the Somali Association of South Africa reported that just in the two months prior in January and February 2017, 15 Somali nationals were killed in separate incidences in Cape Town (Mortlock, 2017). In September 2017, the Somali Community Board of South Africa reported that "teenager Ismail 'Sakin' Ali became the twenty-first Somali national to be killed in Cape Town's townships" in the 40 days prior to the report (Whittles, 2017). The article cites the Board's chairman who stated that, "This is normal – every second day of late, we are experiencing multiple deaths in a single night" (ibid). Attacks against Somali shopkeepers in particular have led to a collective memory and ongoing experience of violence within the community.

In seeking to understand the conditions that lead to eruptions of violence in South Africa, Jonny Steinberg states, "More analytical attention needs to be paid to the scene of the encounters between the 'us' and the 'them' of collective violence" (Steinberg, 2018:1). Relying on characterising violence simply as "xenophobic" renders little significant progress towards understanding of the root causes of violence and hostility beyond settling on xenophobia as identity politics and senseless, irrational chaos (Hickel, 2014:117). Violence may be more broadly characteristic of an implosion of the frustrations, antagonisms and fears that result

from economic disenfranchisement and its implications on social and class identities, gender norms and social reproduction and inclusion. Drawing on Hickel (2014) for further clarity,

“The Marxist perspective is correct to claim that xenophobic violence is a reaction to neoliberalism, but only inasmuch as economic decline is experienced according to a particular cultural idiom; namely, as a crisis of social reproduction. In other words, the relationship between neoliberalism and xenophobic violence is not deterministic in the materialist sense ... Violence against foreigners is less about fixing flows and ordering anomie than about re-establishing the conditions for social reproduction and demarcating the precincts of moral personhood” (Hickel, 2014:104).

In this sense, violence may be characteristic of a notable disjuncture between social reproduction as it relates to citizenship and belonging in communities left impoverished and marginalised in post-apartheid South Africa. As explored further in chapter 4, violence is also exacerbated by limitations to South Africa’s implementation of international refugee rights conventions and their interpretations in local migration policies, as well as political, institutional and media-driven representations of xenophobia and “foreignness”.

### **Technologies for enabling mobility and belonging – situating the case of Somali migrants in South Africa**

This study takes as a point of departure the creative and inventive ways in which Somali migrants adopt digital technologies in the context of a history and manifestation of violence experienced by Somali migrants in post-apartheid South Africa. In addition to the memory and experience of violence in everyday life in South Africa, this dissertation also situates the experience of Somali migrants in the context of Somalia’s contemporary social history which is characterised by decades of feudal strife and more recent insurgent warfare. This has created or compounded a situation of ongoing political instability, mass global migration and dispersed families and clan networks.

Mobility within Somalia has been long-standing over centuries. Recent mobility in the last three decades has been driven by weakened state presence in Somalia since 1991 when then-President Siad Barre’s regime was overthrown, leading to a lack of central government until 2012 when a new Constitution was enacted. Somalia’s political history destabilised much of the country and citizenry, and has led to increased cross-border migration flows as a survival response (Huisman et al, 2011). Somali communities have congregated in almost every country (Horst, 2006b:1), a development that has rendered Somali families increasingly

globally dispersed, with kin and clan networks sustained transnationally through virtual communications technologies and mechanisms of group hospitality (Horst, 2006b; Lewis, 1994). In this context, local social worlds are often partially maintained over global networks and virtual spaces (Greenblatt et al, 2010; Schiller et al, 1995:53). This trend challenges modern citizenship forms (Isin, 2012), which associate “belonging” with allegiances to the nation-state, freezing national identities, immobilising “frontier identities” (Kopytoff, 1987) and paying scant regard to the messiness of everyday claims and counterclaims of inclusion or exclusion occasioned by flexible mobility. As such, this study demonstrates how belonging intersects physical and virtual spaces and how it is further complicated by the politicisation of mobility and immobility, both online and offline in the contemporary world (Adey, 2010; Appadurai, 1990; Blunt, 2007; Castells, 1996; Clifford, 1997; Nyamnjoh, 2005, 2006; Sheller & Urry 2006).

A study of (im)mobility, digital technologies and transnational spaces of belonging is particularly important in the context of Somali migration in South Africa. Migrants may be among the most affected by the closing of national borders and the shrinking of civil society and free spaces of expression, and digital technologies may play a critical role in the lives of those who have been politically, economically and socially marginalised. Marginality, as used in this thesis, is understood to mean the “relative power that is enacted by members of society via social positioning and the resistance that accompanies negotiations with one’s position” (Nyamnjoh & Brudvig, 2016:6). Furthermore, although marginality is often positioned in relation to dominance, this thesis observes that “neither dominance nor marginality may be labelled or considered as fixed” (ibid).

With such considerations in mind, this dissertation explores the following questions:

1. How do Somali migrants appropriate and make use of digital technologies in the context of their (im)mobility? In what ways do digital technologies intersect with power, citizenship, agency and belonging in the experience by Somali migrants of mobility?
2. What role does the internet play in group identity formulation and contestation in the context of cross border mobility? In particular, how does the internet interact with cultural values and local constraints?
3. To what extent do digital technologies – and the internet and social media in particular – generate empowerment as well as new configurations of marginality, particularly for women?
4. What do the specific experiences of Somali migrants in Cape Town, South Africa, reveal about the current state of geopolitical trends around (im)mobility and digital

technologies, and their impact on culture, belonging and conviviality in the 21st century?

As explored in detail in chapter 3 on methodology, this ethnographic research has focused on interviewing and observing the digitally mediated lives of Somali migrants in Cape Town through fieldwork both offline and online which took place between April 2014 and March 2018. While I am adamant to address the research topic and questions to the best of my ability, I am also driven to try to transcend relying categorically on geographic, national and ethnic identity (such as Somali or South African) as a means of analysis. All too often studies adopt and rely on pre-existing indicators and categories of belonging (such as nationality) in analysis and discussions about migration and society. However, in a world of mobility, fluidity and flexibility in which life histories transcend colonial-era geographic borders and traditional cultural norms; where life is lived on and through virtual spaces, and with family, friendship and affinity networks that span the world – it is more important than ever to attempt to transcend cultural and geographical determinism and the adage of national citizenship and, instead, imagine a world of flexible citizenship and global belonging (Ong, 1999; Nyamnjoh, 2007a; Isin, 2012).

It is also important to understand the nature of flexible identities in the context of urban diversities, as opposed to merely understanding transnational migrants on the lines of citizenship and belonging, at the frontier of everywhere and nowhere. As such, this study of mobility in the context of the Somali diaspora has attempted to go beyond studying “refugees”, a categorisation that immobilises based on assumptions of marginality, categories of identity associated with the “sending country” (Kapur, 2008, Malkki 2001) and belonging associated solely with one’s “homeland”. As Malkki notes, “The term ‘refugee’ has analytical usefulness not as a label for a special, generalisable ‘kind’ or ‘type’ of person or situation, but only as a broad legal or descriptive rubric” (Malkki, 1995:496) – in which case, narrative becomes a critical technique in order to understand individual experiences. Through use of narrative techniques and a focus on “becoming” and creative and fluid appropriations of identity, this study de-essentialises the notion of Somalis only as refugees, and situates Somalis in South Africa as part of a globally connected national diaspora. Group accessibility through virtual means creates mechanisms of belonging that transcend local politics of inclusivity, and indeed reaffirms that information and communication technologies (ICTs) create new frontiers for the navigation of space and belonging, throwing aside distinctive of paradoxes of being here and there; an insider and an outsider; and demonstrating the complex and nuanced reality of interconnections, interdependence and conviviality, and their role in fostering multiculturalism. This speaks to the idea of “digital diasporas” as conceptualised by Jennifer Brinkerhoff (2009), as groups whose encounters through cyberspace, as well in physical localities, influence the

mobilisation of hybrid identities which are inclusive of liberal values and based on benefits generated from social capital. Digital diasporas may, in turn, support integration and security in the host society (Brinkerhoff, 2009). Within this framework, South Africa is an important transnational node, connected worldwide through its migrant networks and communities. Indeed, as others have also argued, South Africa stands to benefit economically and socially from its migrant communities, digital diasporas and transnational networks supported by ICTs (Korhonen et al, 2018).

### **Flexibility in Ethnographic Research: Defining Research from the “Field” Onwards**

As further described in chapter 3 on methodology, what started off as research about Somali transnational family networks became (through the life cycle of ethnographic research) an investigation of how ICTs intersect with global mobility and belonging across both offline and virtual spaces. Thus, this research came to focus on how (im)mobility and belonging manifest themselves in the technologically-mediated lives of Somali migrants in Cape Town. This shift came about partially due to the challenges of identifying and obtaining informed consent from interlocutors and their family networks to participate in my research. To a certain degree, I felt and was made to feel by Somali migrants that I encountered in the initial stages of implementation of my research project that it was too intrusive to push for people’s time and emotional space as part of my own research agenda. This was especially made evident as one interlocutor (who is a female leader in the community, and became a good friend and a confidant of mine through the research) expressed how emotional and challenging it was even for her to open up to me and speak about her personal life and community issues. Creating rapport as we are taught as students of social anthropology, it would appear, is not all that there is to collecting quality data, especially if and when one is made to be sensitive to the extremely challenging precarities in the lives of one’s vulnerable interlocutors.

After I started to inquire with several interlocutors about conducting more interviews through their networks, I got the impression that they may have sought to distance themselves from further participation in the research – it could be that spending time on interviews and research is simply consuming of valuable time in a community where there are many requests from students, academics and NGOs for research time and support. I also considered how interviews of interlocutors’ families might potentially create tensions or anxieties in an already vulnerable and traumatic context characterised by separated families and a strong geopolitical influence on life trajectories and personal security. Several participants on whom I relied to identify new research participants were doubtful that others would participate in interviews, and thought it would be very hard to get others to participate because “they will think you are

from the government or UNHCR” (the United Nations High Commission for Refugees). Perhaps if I had continued to volunteer as English teacher through a non-governmental organisation that provides services to migrants and refugees (as I did when starting this research and discuss in the methodology chapter), the original course of research may have been possible. However, as I describe in the methodology chapter of this dissertation, I was conflicted about how to bridge the role of teacher and researcher, and therefore, to obtain truly informed consent to participate in research while simultaneously undertaking teaching tasks. My experiences were highly relatable to the ethical quandaries put forward by Posel and Ross (2015). Their book *Ethical Quandaries in Social Research* describes the complexities of “ethical decision-making as they arise somewhat unpredictably in the field and in the very personal ways in which researchers had to deal with them” (Posel & Ross, 2015:6). During the course of this research, I found myself relating to their description of how questions of ethics often present themselves in the field. Ethical quandaries emerge

“in the heat of the moment and then as this cools with retrospection; with emotional along with rational underpinnings, and with varying temporalities and senses of urgency, in the midst of varying degrees of knowledge and ignorance, and in the context of fluid social relationships that are always powerfully inscribed in the practice of research, along with the vectors of power that derive – frequently asymmetrically – from the wider context of South Africa’s past and present” (Posel & Ross, 2015:6).

In the methodology chapter, I report personal experiences in conducting ethnographic fieldwork and the necessity to wear different hats in the process to gain access and build personal relationships and solidarity, as well as to question my underlying assumptions about the field of research and participants in the study. At the onset of my research, I was able to develop a higher level of trust being in the role of “teacher” rather than “researcher”. This is an interesting distinction to reflect upon in the context of conducting ethnography and the different subjectivities we embody and strategically adopt (or aim to distance ourselves from) as we enter and strive to understand social worlds. Bennett & Pereira (2013) present this experience through the metaphor of “jacketed women” – with the jacket being an interesting symbol for the ways in which our embodied history and habitus “affect our intellectual and imaginative selves, organise our bodies and minds ... and present us to the world” (Bennett & Pereira, 2013:3). Critically, in expanding the focus of the research beyond the intricacies of Somali transnational family and kinship networks, I wanted the research to capture the ways in which increasingly prevalent and changing geopolitical trends around both migration and digital technologies intersect in people’s lives, particularly those who are on the move and who have become deeply affected by the implementation of conservative migration policies and



the closing of borders globally; as well as technology companies' corporate practices and the implications for networked lives and experiences of belonging. Focusing on researching individual life trajectories and the subjective role of digital technologies in the (im)mobility of individuals' lives was a way to investigate this.

### **Somali Mobility in South Africa**

Somali migrants in South Africa note that mobility has always been a way of life – based on historically nomadic lifestyles in which mobility takes place within dense kin and clan networks (Ripero-Muñiz, 2015; Brudvig, 2014; Huisman et al, 2011:26). Migration is not a new phenomenon for Somalis, whose relationship with “being from Somalia” is perpetuated by legal confines which define and constrain articulation of multiple or flexible identities, particularly in the context of South Africa's contemporary history of violence against non-nationals. Tendencies towards Somali migration are expressed linguistically through the term *buufis*, which is used to express a longing to move – it may also refer to a sense of stress which results from an unsatisfied desire to travel (Jinnah, 2012a, 2016). Contemporary Somali migration has become characterised by a lack of faith in the state and the desire for mobility, even when immobilised by the confines of identity, legality and borders.

Jonny Steinberg's ethnographic book *A Man of Good Hope* (2015) sheds lights on the inter-subjective experiences, hopes and fears of Somali migrants in South Africa and the extraordinarily diverse historical, political and personal underpinnings of mobility. By mediating with the truth of their circumstances, migrants negotiate the limits of their conviviality with the state and, in turn, create new channels that contribute to their social networks and convivial encounters (Brudvig, 2015). Home and family heritage networks are vital affiliations and means of capital that Somali draw upon to survive in the case of retractive parameters of legal citizenship, limited access to public services and complicated trajectories of belonging in South Africa. In *A Man of Good Hope*, we follow the life story of Somali-born Asad Abdullahi, starting with his life in Blikkiesdorp, Cape Town, before flashing back first to his early life and travels as a young boy in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia; then to his travel in stages to Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth/Sterkstroom and Cape Town and, eventually, to his relocation to the United States. Asad Abdullahi's inherited clan identity as an AliYusef is vitally important in his ability to link up with kin across the continent and in South Africa. Having moved frequently and independently from a very young age, without direct contact with his parents or siblings, Asad's cultivation of networks through other AliYusefs is a valuable lifeline to physical security and business opportunity. For instance, upon Asad's arrival in Johannesburg, when he identified himself as an AliYusef, the Somali community connected

him telephonically to a first cousin, Abdicuur Abdullahi. Abdicuur, who immediately invited Asad to Port Elizabeth and secured his transport to get there. Personal networks are particularly important, and become more salient, in a context of widespread attacks against Somali shopkeepers (Amit & Gastrow, 2012). Asad's wife, Foosiya, understands these attacks as imminent and, as a result, the family's daily life is characterised by intimidation and the fear that "One day, the country will decide that it has had enough of us. And then there will be no safe place. Wherever we go, the people will want to kills us ... Things change, Asad ... things change" (Steinberg, 2015:231).

In the context of South Africa, based on my observations, social and institutional exclusion of Somali migrants from local society and public safety networks has facilitated autonomous circles of inclusion and self-integration in zones such as Bellville, a locality in Cape Town. Prior fieldwork in Bellville for my Master's thesis in 2012 highlights that many Somali migrants settled in Bellville to avoid negative attitudes and discrimination by South Africans in township areas and informal settlements, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 xenophobic outbreaks. Social roots in Bellville, as in many refugee and migrant communities, are, however, closely linked with networks maintained across global diaspora communities (Brudvig, 2014). In this context, belonging is increasingly mediated through the internet, based on interactions with Somali diaspora networks and communities in South Africa and in other countries around the world, as well as with home networks. Belonging is marked by "hybridity" and mobile subjectivities defined by, as Gilroy (2005) terms "the politics of transfiguration" and traversing historically produced and socially constituted boundaries of state, nation, community and even what it means to be a person (in the case of this research, a Somali in South Africa). However, as Abu-Lughod (2005) notes,

"Even if people consider themselves to belong primarily to (and to engage with media as) subnational or transnational communities ... the national is still a potent frame of reference, especially in the many countries where the state has been the prime actor in the creation and regulation of media" (Abu Lughod, 2005:28).

In view of the centrality of the internet in the lives of mobile and migrant Somalis, the next section discusses the role of the internet as a social tool that enables new social transformations through flexibility in mobility and identity, as well as through reconfigurations of traditional notions of belonging. However, digital technologies such as the internet may also be used to encode hierarchies and social control, leading to new forms of immobility, and reinforcing the mobility–immobility paradox.

## **Digital Technology, Social Transformation and the Encoding of Social Hierarchies**

The fast speed of technological innovation is driving diverse and profound social transformations. While access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) creates many positive benefits for those who are digitally connected, vast and persistent digital divides continue to exist. Half of the world remains unconnected to the internet – excluded from access to this vast global public domain of information, knowledge and creative human potential. The digital “haves” are presented with new avenues for communication, self-representation, self-expression and cultural exchange online. This has enabled new types of sociality – not only for those who are connected, but also for the unconnected who may still access digital affordances through their exchanges and interdependencies among the digitally connected. As such, new socialities are enabled through digital technologies, just as others may be discouraged in the process. As demonstrated further in chapter five, new information and communication channels greatly influence cultures of exchange and conviviality in migrant communities.

For those who are connected to the internet, new forms of social interaction on and through digital platforms and social media, in particular, create opportunities to amplify voice, agency and flexible identities. At the same time, despite being profoundly transnational and borderless, digital infrastructures and online platforms reinforce borders, social hierarchies and cultural determination in new ways. As much as digital technologies enable individuals to claim new avenues for voice and agency, and to circumvent historical inequalities and discriminatory norms, they are not a panacea. Unfortunately, new technologies continue to be held captive by social, economic, political and cultural inequalities in which marginalities are often reproduced through digital mediums. The social context of internet access and use varies considerably across and within countries, cultures and social groups. In this context, I argue that it is important to understand how digital technologies intersect with culture and social norms offline and online among diverse communities to support new configurations of agency and empowerment. Here, ‘empowerment’ may be understood as enabling “autonomy, self-direction, self-confidence, [and] self-worth” (Narayan, 2005). Empowerment might be considered to be “a process by which oppressed persons gain some control over their lives by taking part with others in development of activities and structures that allow people increased involvement in matters which affect them directly” (Bystydzienski, 1992). Furthermore, empowerment is “fluid, often unpredictable, and requires attention to the specificities of time and place” (Parpart et al, 2002).

On the one hand, the internet is a social tool that enables flexibility in mobility and identity as well as reconfigurations of social capital and belonging. It has even made possible manipulations of citizenship – a point evidenced by the controversy on how Russia influenced the 2016 United States presidential election remotely by taking advantage of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, along with their paid advertising platforms (Morgan, 2018; Doshi et al, 2018; Narayanan et al, 2018). As Narayanan et al (2018) observe, “At important moments of political and military crises, social media users not only share substantial amounts of professional news, but also share extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, masked commentary, fake news and other forms of junk news ... Given the central role that social media play in public life, these platforms have become a target for propaganda campaigns and information operations” (Narayanan et al, 2018:1). Once digitally connected, people are exposed to possibilities to explore new ways of socialisation, to make new connections and to assume power in ways that were previously unheard of or impossible to activate. So long as social and economic factors limited connectivity and communication power; formal associations largely defined legitimate participation in political spaces. New social, political and economic transformations are now possible due to an openness in content creation, new channels for information seeking and sharing, and virtual exchanges on the internet. Technologically speaking, these may not discriminate on the basis of traditional boundaries of geography, income, gender, race or other factors in the way that offline interactions do. For example, anyone who has affordable access to the internet can, technically, upload a video onto YouTube or edit a Wikipedia entry. Without the internet, very few would have had the opportunity to create videos or document historical events in public records, or to inform real time discussions. On the other hand, the internet is by far a neutral territory, despite the benefits to be gained for individuals. The state, corporations and online trolls make use of the same technologies and informational tools to identify and track citizens, monitor dissent and police the mobility, power and expression of people. As McChesney argues, those who are in power “have the ability and resources to regulate, manipulate and use digital communications just as much as, if not more than, those out of power” (McChesney, 2013:10).

On the one hand, it may be argued that, to a certain degree, the internet and social media have liberated individuals from socio-cultural norms, leading people to apply, negotiate and adapt their identity, culture and social life via the virtual world. In this sense, digital technologies (and the internet and social media in particular) allow for inter-subjective socio-cultural and communicative practices through which people constantly negotiate with others online. In doing so, they define themselves as active agents of their own personal identity and future trajectories. Technology is creatively adopted based on subjective needs and desires

and, therefore, becomes embodied as a product of human imagination and creativity. However, on the other hand, as much as the internet allows for such empowering possibilities – defined by its openness – it is also increasingly a space creatively used by the powerful and influential to define and protect identities which often become hard-lined and inflexible in the process, leading to social polarisation (Tufekci, 2018a; Nayaran et al, 2018). Further, McChesney presents a critical point – the “elephant in the room” across arguments of both internet celebrants and sceptics – that is, that, “political economy should be the organising principle for evaluating the digital revolution” (McChesney, 2013:13), including “how capitalism dominates social life” (ibid). As McChesney writes, the internet was developed as a culmination of “government-subsidised-and-directed research during the post-World War II decades, often by the military and leading research universities” (McChesney, 2013:99). Today, the internet continues to be sustained by corporate and state interests as a the result of four key historical factors including: “corporate-dominated policy-making in the 1990s; unclear policies regarding the regulation of the internet; the neoliberal political culture of the ’90s; and the internet bubble of the late ’90s, which made it seem as if the internet was ripe for further privatisation. By allowing private interests to take control of the development and design of the internet, the optimism of a once anti-commercial endeavour turned into a juggernaut for capital accumulation, with substantial social consequences” (Auerbach & Clark, 2016). Indeed, “ICTs are not free from the logic of domination and appropriation typical of neoliberalism, where the tendency is to prioritise profitability, often to the detriment of democracy and service to humanity” (Nyamnjoh & Brudvig, 2016:7).

The political economy of the internet is ever much so a concern as the openness and decentralisation on which the World Wide Web was founded – the interface created for public access to the internet – comes under threat by various factors, including:

- a) the centralisation of online activity on several social media platforms;
- b) the ability of governments to enact mass-surveillance initiatives;
- c) the ability of the state and internet service providers to regulate content through censorship and apply preferable treatment of websites and information in the absence of net neutrality legislation; and
- d) the bulk collection, ownership and sale of personal and large troughs of digital data footprints by corporations.

Online personal data is harvested and sold by the very corporations that claim to be connecting the world as a force of democracy and empowering the poor. These corporations monitor individuals’ online activities, and target people with content and ads telling them who

they should be, how they should think and the choices they should make. The design of algorithms and use of personal data by technology companies lack transparency and accountability, despite the fact that people, as users, are the product, monetised through the datafication of personal experience and identity (Lyon, 2003). This raises serious ethical concerns around several issues, including:

- a) the use of personal data as currency in online ‘mediascapes’ is driven by the manipulation of consent in opaque terms of service agreements;
- b) the technological architecture itself is emblematic of a culture of surveillance – the default mode that governs our digital interactions; and
- c) the combined application of big data and artificial intelligence by social media platforms fuels “data driven indicators of belonging”.

Indeed, the social reproduction of hierarchies – encoded as data – allows little room for individuals to contest how we are coded to belong in this world, and has limited self-determination in defining flexible identities. Through our digital selves, we are programmed into contrived hierarchies with little choice in the matter and limited recourse for resistance. Furthermore, as researcher, Nandini Chami, has pointed out how we can control our identity when it’s widely distributed throughout data nodes across the digital sphere (IT for Change and TATA Institute of Social Sciences, 2018).

Indeed, governments have created new ways of policing mobilities and citizenship in an era of migration – including through digital strategies such as biometric technologies (Ajana, 2012). As Schou and Hjelholt explain, “Digital citizenship is becoming increasingly normalised ... As society and governmental institutions become reliant on digital technologies, citizens are expected to be and act digitally ...” They argue that the “digital citizen as a new political figure” is “intertwined with relations of power” in the “production of citizen-subjectivity” (Schou & Hjelholt, 2018:510). This emergent “form of political subjectivity” is connected to “wider processes of neoliberalisation and state restructuring” (Schou & Hjelholt, 2018:507): for example the turn towards market-oriented development and individualised (over collective) structures embedded within particular geographies and historical contexts.

Muller (2004) discusses the extent to which contemporary citizenship became securitised in the period post-September 11th. He argues that, “This securitisation contributes directly to the intensification of conventional citizenship practice, as biometric technologies are employed to conceal and advance the heightened exclusionary and restrictive practices of contemporary securitised citizenship” (Muller, 2004). This, he argues, is central to “identity management” –

and the identification of perceived “threats” through digital fingerprints, retina scans and facial recognition. “These visual securitisation acts are a form of ‘cultural governance’ that serve [sic] to reinforce the current ‘state of exception’ as the norm” (Muller, 2004:282). This is significant in the context of the media and government’s construction of “the migrant, refugee, alien, and ‘Other’ as security threats, a discourse that has placed migration on government security agendas” (Muller, 2004:282), leading to the closure of national borders. Digital technologies have introduced new avenues of governance taking advantage of the deterioration public–private divides and a shift towards securitisation of citizenship – or “discrimination between ‘friend and enemy’ (Muller, 2004:290). In this sense, identity management becomes based on protectionism, and is subject to an influx of normative ideas about how citizens should behave, and national values (Schou & Hjelholt, 2018) - which are inferred through personal data and histories, including the introduction of social media background checks in visa application processes in the United States (BBC, 2017b). A migration agenda dominated by securitisation has polarised society and diminished trust in governments (Castells, 2018; Pew, 2017). In a survey of 36 countries, 52% of people said they are unsatisfied with the way their government is working. The report notes that, “Attitudes about the functioning of democracy are closely tied to publics’ trust in their national government ...Partisanship has a significant impact on attitudes about the functioning of democracy” (Pew, 2017). Technological architectures and corporate digital platforms are, thus, important spheres of analysis for understanding new paradigms of public participation, citizenship, power and belonging in a world of mobility.

In addition to encoding new political and governance strategies, as described above, technological architectures have also led to the encoding of social hierarchies. This is primarily because of the concentration of internet users on specific technology platforms, such as Facebook. Online platforms are sustained by data footprints which are used to code and categorise us into inflexible boxes of nationality, gender, race, class, caste, income and other prescribed categories. Technology companies have created, as Sherry Turkle (1984) coins, our “second self” through our data. Through society’s hyper-use of digital mediums, we are on the path to “being” digital, as a “normative rationality” – providing the basis of what it means to be a full citizen, and determining the “rationality” of modern social life. As Schou and Hjelholt argue in the context of digital citizenship in Denmark, “Being digital is constructed as the proper mode of citizen-subjectivity” (Schou & Hjelholt, 2018:514). Ruppert, Isin and Bigo argue that “data has a performative power that is resignifying political life. That is, data politics is concerned with not only political struggles around data collection and its deployments, but how data is generative of new forms of power relations and politics and different and interconnected scales” (Ruppert et al, 2017:2). Harari (2018) reminds us that the internet “was

hyped in its early days as a libertarian panacea that would free people from all centralised systems – but is now poised to make centralised authority more powerful than ever”.

This may lead to greater immobility and inflexibility of identities, and of institutions. Indeed, inflexible identities may perpetuate online and the fire is fanned through online “filter bubbles”, which serve as echo chambers driven by self-mediated content and the echoing of personal opinions via social networks. Bakshy et al define “filter bubbles” as content selected by algorithms “according to a viewer’s previous behaviours” leading to “echo chambers” which are “devoid of attitude-challenging content” (Bakshy et al, 2015). This has been shown by Bakshy et al and Tufekci to make social media susceptible to the spread of misinformation or the reinforcement of “ideological homophily in friend networks” (Bakshy et al, 2015, Tufekci, 2015). These social and informational bubbles, one might argue, are not so different from the socio-economic and spatial separation of people of different economic status, race, ethnicity or language groups within a city or locality. The engraining of identity is also perpetuated by the design of platforms and data systems as the new public sphere. Indeed, one has limited capacity to define oneself outside of boxed categories of belonging and language as code, that is limited in its ability to capture and code expression, emotion and nuances: the “in between” and “in process” of thought, language, persona which translates into important ascribed categories of belonging, such as gender and race. Digital algorithms then define how people may access online services, information, institutions and new publics. Research by Safiya Noble (2018) has shown that the indexing and categorisation of data online perpetuates racism and sexism through “algorithms of oppression” (Noble, 2018). Search engines such as Google often misrepresent and discriminate through their data-driven algorithms. This has been shown by Eubanks (2018) to lead to new forms of exclusion and marginalisation. Noble’s analysis of “data discrimination” and Eubanks’ warning about “automating inequality” challenges the popular notion that digital tools such as search engines deliver an equal playing field for diverse people, identities and ideas (Noble, 2018; Eubanks, 2018).

### **Digital Technologies and Somali Transnational Mobility and Belonging**

So why, you may be asking, is this long discourse about the impact of the internet and social media relevant when the core topic is a local Somali community?

The reason is simple. Digital technologies and the internet have had a profound effect on “micro” communities, which are now as much a part of the “macro” diaspora and global community as they are part of a local neighbourhood. Digital technologies (the internet and social media in particular) have created linkages from Cape Town’s Somali community in Bellville right back to



towns and villages in Somalia where Somali “identity” is born or forged, and across huge Somali diaspora communities in Kenya, and throughout Africa, the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and elsewhere. The Somali diaspora provides a compelling example of the power of virtual communication and its role in constructions of identity within histories of mobility and migration. Common tools such as cell phones and new particularities of digital engagement, including online chat rooms, have become key transnational spaces where people on the move negotiate identity and obligations in a world of mobility. A lack of an established state and continental clan warfare in Somalia forced people to formulate national networks and affiliations in the absence of state and institutional structures. The popularity of the internet and online communication amongst Somali worldwide is representative of the ways in which virtually connected members of the Somali diaspora, and youth in particular, constitute civic, state and national networks that defy territory, time and space, creating new linguistic and social forms and cultural identities emerging from both displacement and nostalgia for belonging.

The exploration of the political economy of new information and communication technologies above is intended to answer, inter alia, the following questions in connection with Somali migrants in Cape Town, South Africa:

What are the experiences of mobility and transnational living of Somali migrants in Cape Town? What is the social context of empowerment on and through the internet, noting that empowerment is always a work in progress? In which ways are experiences of mobility circumscribed and limited by new forms of social control and manipulation through social media? By this I mean not only corporate and government control, but potentially also parochial networks and cultural guardians, as we see in the polarisation of societies all around the world today. To what extent is the empowering potential of the internet based on “give and take”, in which empowerment is always incomplete? And what does this mean in the context of modern digital identity management, for migrants in particular, who often fall in between the borders of legality and belonging? How might the inflexible nature of identities online – reified by inflexible identities offline in post-apartheid South Africa – influence political subjectivity and digital citizenship for marginalised groups?

In this context, the architectural design of both physical and online spaces is paramount to prospects for citizenship and conviviality, not only in Bellville’s Somali community in Cape Town, but in many diverse and transient migrant communities. By way of definition, conviviality emphasises empowerment for individuals and groups alike, and not the marginalisation of the one by or for the other. Conviviality may emerge from a resolution of group or individual frictions which, when turned into meaningful relationships, may actually facilitate mutual

interests (Brudvig, 2014). Conviviality rests on the nuances lived in everyday relations and understandings. It rests upon a foundation of neutrality, but is upheld by a brimming of aspirations, potentiality and pride. Micro-trends of socialisation and daily interactions facilitate human interactions and relations which may become convivial or not. Such social interactions expose people to new ideas that may diverge from their own. This helps individuals in society to find ways to navigate around difference to achieve social cohesion.

There is a shared imperative for harmony in a convivial society. Maintained by a suppression of animosity, a convivial society may be seen as comprising “amiable, intimate sets of relationships which carry, as well, a notion of peace and equality” (Overing & Passes, 2000:14). Encouraging a convivial society may involve negotiations among different or competing agentive forces (Nyamnjoh, 2002:111). While many who have access to the internet are able to claim space and voice through online tools, there is a risk that this will, on the whole, not translate into sustained and distributed opportunity, amicable relations, public civil dialogue and conviviality. While online public spaces lend themselves to a plethora of possibilities for civil discourse (such as in the town square, marketplace or piazza; enacted through social media comment streams and online forums), identity politics and architectural design of information online often inhibit or distort exposure to and interaction with diverse opinions, identities and ideas. For example, Zeynep Tufekci has termed YouTube “the great radicaliser”, as the platform’s recommendations and autoplay algorithm “promotes, recommends and disseminates videos in a manner that appears to constantly up the stakes” (Tufekci, 2018b). This leads to confirmation bias, as personal views are amplified by one’s immediate social network. The design of online platforms also leads to the promotion of content which is increasingly “shocking”, “entertaining”, or that will keep the viewer on a particular website for a longer period of time. Indeed, as Tufekci writes, “What keeps people glued to YouTube? Its algorithm seems to have concluded that people are drawn to content that is more extreme than what they started with” (ibid). This constriction creates more fundamentalist rather than fluid identity practices based on existing networks of social capital, underlying identity aspirations, or “nostalgia for belonging”. While digital platforms may create the conditions for conviviality, in practice the emergence of conviviality through online spaces is questionable. Discourses among people with different political, religious and gender identities often lead to inflammatory comments, trolling and hate speech. The United Nations has investigated the role of Facebook in spreading hate speech and escalating the persecution and genocide of the Rohingya, an ethnic minority group in Myanmar. In 2018, the government of Sri Lanka shut down Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram due to the spread and escalation of anti-Muslim hate speech online and ethnic strife in the country. As these

cases and many other examples demonstrate, the internet plays a significant role in contemporary society and its prospects for conviviality, peace, security and development.

While popular social media platforms facilitate access to social networks, social capital and some degree of information and communications architecture – the context in which access has played out, which is primarily via social media platforms – has led the majority of people around the world to be connected to the internet only through a “walled garden”, a known metaphor used to describe the closed nature of online platforms in which a specific service provider directs the user’s access to content, applications and services, as opposed to their accessing all content on equal terms via the open internet (Chen et al., 2017). This may ultimately limit their access to diverse information, agency and “equality of autonomy” (Gurumurthy, 2015). Indeed, the global trend toward mobile-first and mobile-only access, perpetuates this walled garden phenomenon, and we have to ask ourselves, how are agency and conviviality limited, and how is violence exacerbated by way of the technological architecture of connectivity? For many people around the world Facebook essentially *is* the internet (Mirani, 2015). A study by the World Wide Web Foundation (2015) showed that just a third of women living in urban poor areas across Africa, Asia and Latin America have internet access – but of these women, 87% reported using mainly Facebook, while just 21% reported ever having actively searched for information online. This includes information about sexual and reproductive health, legal rights and education (ibid). This demonstrates that while the internet is a critical architecture of public space, mediating access to information, to the economy, to social capital and to public life – and indicating women’s involvement in, and desire for social connections – currently it may not be empowering the marginalised in their access diverse, relevant information and civic participation. It may even be exacerbating inequalities between the “digital haves” and “have nots” (World Wide Web Foundation, 2015; Brudvig, 2018). Henry and Powell (2017) suggest that online spaces and communities are increasingly co-opted to drive sexist, racist and homophobic discrimination and violence. The architecture of digital platforms has rallied the competitive nature of ideology, perpetuating stereotypes and encouraging homogeneity and extremism within groups, as well as vitriol and exclusion amongst groups. This is not at all unique to any particular group of people, and the same trends can be elucidated whether talking about popular entertainment stars or religious idols, or about political campaigns, or any other leaders or influencers that participate in online debate and shape collective social thought. These trends are also perpetuated by the culture of radical participation and virality online. More research is needed to explore if and how the internet influences conviviality and prospects for peace, security and development. This study of Somali migrants in Cape Town provides an attempt to begin to explore these factors in the context of experiences of migration and mobility, and practices of belonging.

## **Geopolitics of Migration and the Significance of Virtual Space to Social Worlds**

This research highlights the important influence and role of digital technologies on migration, (im)mobility and belonging globally, using Somali migrants in Cape Town, South Africa, as a case in point. The influence of ICTs on Somali migrants in Cape Town is particularly profound. As a result of experiences and insights navigating the field of study, this dissertation argues that a combination of legal frameworks, public infrastructures and cultural norms exert a strong influence on the Somali community's access to rights, cultural reproduction, shared identity, inter-subjectivity and transnational belonging. Heightened group consciousness mediated through ICTs may result from social exclusion and perceived prejudices in local communities, which catalyse transnational engagements. Indeed, mobile communications are said to enhance the autonomy of individuals, enabling people to set up personal connections and access to information without relying on public or institutionally controlled channels (Castells et al, 2007:1).

In studying the intersections of technology, mobility and identity among Somali migrants in Cape Town, this study investigates how uses of technology – and the internet and social media in particular – are situated within a context of increasing contestations over identity, socio-economic rights and belonging. While research was done primarily in the South African context, the learnings of this research are relevant to a wider geographical and global audience. This topic is particularly relevant as migration and refugee flows are leading to significant socially, economically and politically charged contestations over citizenship and belonging. Migration geopolitics and social transformations associated with “hybrid” identities and citizenships, diaspora groups and access to public resources and services are significant to political agendas.

In their annual report on global forced displacement, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that eighty-four per cent of the world's refugees are hosted in developing countries (UNHCR, 2017a). In this context, South Africa has become a significant destination for refugees and asylum seekers, as well as economic migrants. The International Organisation for Migration estimates that the total migrant population in South Africa rose from 2% of the population in 2000 to over 5.5% in 2015 (SA Green Paper, 2016:41). At the end of 2017, data reported to the UNHCR indicates that South Africa hosts 88,694 refugees, and 280,027 asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2017a). Somalis comprised almost a quarter of the refugee population in South Africa (Uwimpuhwe & Ruiters, 2018:5).

Viewed in a global context, the mobility of Somali refugees and asylum seekers occurs in the context of reduced immigration opportunities and decreased political tolerance for immigrants in the global north, including in the United States and Europe, as well as Australia. Global trends are also defined by nodes of openness and “preferential destination” countries like Canada (CBC, 2017). Over the course of 2017 while carrying out this research, numerous policy measures and restrictive asylum laws were introduced by governments aimed at keeping refugees in their regions of origin. The UNHCR has noted that its global resettlement programme “risked being undermined in 2017” (UNHCR, 2017b:9). Their report notes that, “Despite an estimated 1.2 million people in need, only 93,200 places were expected to be made available in 2017, 43 per cent fewer than in 2016. This reduction was largely accounted for by a drop in places expected to be made available by the United States of America” (UNHCR, 2017b:9). Drawing on the example of Michaela Pelican, this research strives to present “local views of international migration in a historical context of mobility” and to “point out some of the various connections and transitions between internal, international and intercontinental migration” (Pelican, 2013:238–9). Towards this end, I hope to situate a nuanced understanding of the role of power in “shaping physical and social mobilities” (ibid).

### **Situating the Research Field Site and Participants**

I was drawn to the Bellville central business district area after the excitement of my first field visits there. A vibrant shopping and urban residential area has been developed around the train station, with three and four story buildings and market-stalled side corridors. This area reminded me of places I have been before – such as the flurry of travellers at the New Delhi or Nairobi stations, and triggered positive memories and a sense of familiarity. On my first visits to Bellville for fieldwork, I found it remarkable that every single person that I spoke to asked me where I am from, which led me to question notions of identity and belonging in this locality. This is a question that I grapple to answer - having moved around globally to different places for so much of my life (due to the nature of my parents’ work), as well as having immigrant grandparents, I feel that I am both between places and amongst many; home is the world around me. My own social location is largely defined by my past travel experiences and relations with others in various parts of the world. Being amongst people in Bellville who have travelled, migrated and experienced many worlds, the real (or imagined) idea of “home” became a topic that I was able to relate with interlocutors about, as knowledge gained from travels and experiences during our “past lives” intertwined with our present.

Indeed, most of the interviewees who participated in this research are mobile individuals who have lived in several countries or locations. There are several general threads among the

participants, including: self-identifying as being Somali; and participating in Somali community life; and having a social presence and network in and around Bellville's central business district in Cape Town. Collective experience of "being Somali" in Cape Town is grounded in the Bellville central business district. Space and place are, therefore, important factors of analysis, although they are also disputed through my use of digital ethnography and analysis of virtual mobility beyond the typical neatness of geographic place as a given analytical feature of being and belonging.

### **A glimpse into Bellville's Central Business District, a shopping and musical delight!**

The Bellville Central Business district is centred around the popular Durban Road, a bustling street located off Voortrekker Road, a prominent transport corridor of Cape Town. Bellville is historically an "Afrikaans" suburb about 25 kilometres from Cape Town. The central business district has characteristics of both the "new" and the "old" South Africa. For example, monolithic brown and beige buildings reminiscent of Apartheid era government structures stand parallel to a bustling marketplace filled with things like singing bears displayed for Valentine's Day, mannequins in bright purple, green and pink jeans, buildings such as Wonderful Plaza, inside of which is a labyrinth of male and female clothing shops, homeware and electronics merchandise. Durban Road has a number of large commercial stores, such as First National Bank (one of the main South African banks) and Bed City (a chain furniture shop), as well as many migrant-owned establishments such as the Somali restaurant Dur Dur. As the road extends closer to the train station, the shops are increasingly owned by non-national migrants, particularly Somalis, though many of these shops employ South African shopkeepers who work there daily. The main buildings that house migrant-owned businesses are large plazas, including the main Eastern and Western Plaza, which stand facing each other on either side of the street adjacent to Bellstat Junction, Wonderful Plaza, Continental Plaza, Okavango Plaza, Medical Plaza, Oriental Plaza and Welcome Plaza. Surrounding the train station is a popular shopping mall known as Bellstar Centre. Inside a majority of the plazas one finds a labyrinth of shops, escalators, winding corners and shop signage in various languages. While inside most plazas, the time of day is completely unknown, the twilight of eternal time is projected with the florescent lighting that produces a glare across our paths and interactions. There are no, or perhaps just few, windows. Oftentimes, electronic house and techno music can be heard in contrast to the Somali music which plays in the shops facing the street on the outside. One can only imagine that with the lights off, the surreal Welcome Plaza may seem like an urban club.

A diversity of people interact daily on the streets, from traders to moms and their kids, to university students and security officials patrolling the area. Particularly intriguing are the shops which blast musical delights at their entranceways, onto the public streets and enveloping the attention of everyone in the radius' distance. I observed particularly interesting ways of communicating, such as a vendor repeatedly advertising a product over his microphone loudspeaker ("1 kg of yogurt for R11.99"). At Fashion City, a popular clothing store, there was regularly a group of women standing around the sales baskets singing and chanting, rejoicing and celebrating loudly about a sale. On any given day, one might hear South African radio comedy show being played in one shop, another has electronic music, another plays Somali tunes. One day, there was a giant loudspeaker outside of a local restaurant called Rasco's - a prominent landmark which is bright red in color and recommended to me as "the best place to eat." On one occasion, there was a man balancing his arm on the enormous speaker outside Rasco's, claiming authority to the music that emanated throughout the entire area. He had a microphone in his hands and called out to people passing by. "Where are you going, what do you need?" The music man began serenading the crowd with a blasting duet sung by Celine Dion and Andrea Bocelli, the English and Italian lyrics of this song, The Prayer, are ironically suitable to Bellville. "*Lead us to a place. Guide us with your grace. To a place where we'll be safe.*" Such a diversity of music is spontaneous, out of place and surprising at times. Nevertheless, it is also tolerated by those who may not desire to hear it.







Bellville is a place where two Afrikaans women now in their late 30s collectively remarked, “We used to take the train to Bellville and hang around after school”; and where nowadays, little girls in dark coloured hijabs and pink sunglasses balanced atop on their heads stroll hand in hand with moms attending to daily errands. It is a place where a school bus – an initiative organised by the community – now drops Somali children home from school; they tease each other as they hop out onto the road, their colossal backpacks bouncing up and down as they stroll. It is a place that fifteen years ago many people from Bellville and other parts of Cape Town considered to have reached a point of being “inhabitable”, filled with *skollies*, petty crime and drugs. However, in the past twenty years, migrants, and Somalis in particular, have recognized Bellville as a place brimming with opportunity, and have eagerly developed a marketplace and surrounding residential buildings. In many ways, the area has become



neighbourly, and indeed, convivial, due to the entrepreneurial vigour of transnational migrants, whose relationships with a polyglot city like Cape Town have led them to create a social and business enclave based on its proximity to the train station, to security, and to each other. As groups accommodated by the area have shifted over time, the space imbibes new and different symbolic meanings.

During recent years, the Bellville central business district (adjacent to Durban Road and surrounding the train station) has become home to a diversity of migrants, most notably from Somalia, but also from across Africa and representative of several Asian countries. Countries represented include: Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania, Angola, Mozambique, Kenya, Jordan, Pakistan and Bangladesh amongst others. Many migrated to the area seeking work and income-generating opportunities, such as informal trading, shop keeping and other miscellaneous livelihoods. Bellville is a place of rapid movement and interchange of people, largely propelled by economic activities, daily transportation services and a myriad of other ways of getting by. The proximity of the field site to the train station (and inclusive of it) is vital to understanding social relations in Bellville as a mobile space (Brudvig, 2014). As Frank and Stevens note, “Railway stations are characteristic places for close and varied as well as anonymous and fleeting encounters” (Frank & Stevens, 2007:78). Social relations in places of mobility become constituted through various entities, what Latour (cited in Urry, 2008:13) calls “circulating entities” that bring about relationality within and between localities at varied distances. A community of migrants has culminated in a space that is symbolic of movement and transition informed by ideas of being from elsewhere, redefining Bellville in light of its multiple connections that cut across space, place and geography.



Many Somali migrants and their families settled in Bellville to avoid violence in informal settlements, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 outbreaks of xenophobic violence. Somali shopkeepers specifically continue to be targeted and violently harassed for their success in the informal *spaza* economy, and are often viewed by local traders as intruders. *Spaza* shops are informal convenience stores that are often operated from private residential properties, both in low-income neighbourhoods and urban city districts. A variety of products are sold at *spaza* shops including basic food and household items, mobile phone airtime, cosmetics, toiletries and cigarettes (Gastrow & Amit, 2015). According to Gastrow and Amit,

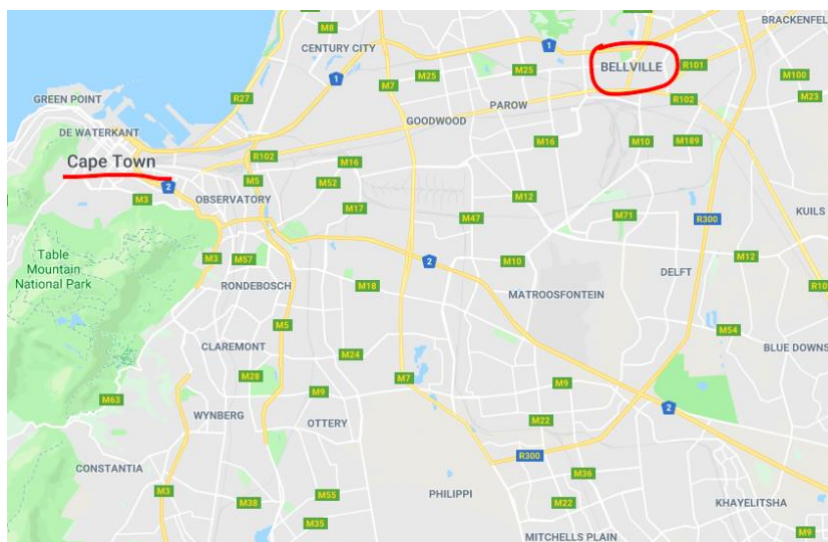
“Somali *spaza* shops reflect a high degree of diversity, especially in size and ownership structure. Shops may be solely or severally owned. Some shops operate from small cramped spaces in dilapidated houses. Others are relatively spacious, brightly coloured, and resemble small superettes (or small supermarkets) with space for customers to walk around ... There are also Somali wholesalers, not included in this study, who supply smaller *spaza* shops.” (Gastrow & Amit, 2015:165).

Many local residents are, indeed, loyal customers of Somali entrepreneurs and benefit from their lower prices and greater variety of goods, but local shopkeepers allegedly become resentful and fear competition. This has led to a generalised feeling of distrust amongst South African *spaza* shop owners and manifests in resentment towards those perceived not to belong (Amit & Gastrow, 2012; Landau, 2011). Many Somali migrants continue to live in other areas of Cape Town; however, Bellville is considered to be a place of community where Somalis gather for business and trading, as well as for relaxing and catching up with friends and family over coffee, a meal, prayers or a soccer game. For many Somali migrants, Bellville has become a home away from home. It is a central node in Somali transnational life, associated with other places such as Mayfair in Johannesburg, Eastleigh in Nairobi and Cedar-Riverside in Minneapolis.

Over the past ten years Bellville’s central business district has become the epicentre of a booming formal and informal economy where migrants, most of whom are Somali refugees, offer consumer and wholesale goods at some of the best prices in all of Cape Town. South African consumers and merchants are increasingly dependent upon the low-cost goods (particularly wholesale goods) provided by Somalis in Bellville. Official statistics referenced in a 2018 meeting between the UN Special Envoy to the Somali Refugee Situation and the South African Deputy Minister of Home Affairs suggest that there are around 32,000 Somali refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa (ReliefWeb, 2018). The Somali Association of South Africa estimates that there are at least 15,000 Somalis residing in Cape Town. Public census

data collected from the 2011 Census of the Bellville CBD (see below) suggests that 47% of residents' first language is "Other" (non-South African) with 18% speaking isiXhosa as a first language, 17% Afrikaans and 10% English and 2% isiZulu; and the remainder reporting other South African official languages. These language statistics emphasise the diversity of the area, and are an important node of analysis, as language is a critical field for understanding culture and social life. The predominance of "Other" languages spoken in the Bellville CBD is linked in many ways to the creation of "Otherness" of Bellville's residents, and their exclusion from the narrative of unity in diversity characteristic of South Africa. At the same time, Bellville represents the known fact that African cities and urban spaces are characterised by mobility and migration (Pieterse, 2010:3). James Clifford's (1997) suggestion of "dwelling-in-travel" describes the liminal zone of Bellville, as it is a place of temporary roots, but seemingly immediate belonging.

*Map of Bellville in Relation to Cape Town Metropolitan Area*



### Map of Bellville Central Business District in Relation to Bellville



### Languages Spoken in Bellville Based on Census Data

| First language | People | Percentage |
|----------------|--------|------------|
| Other          | 164    | 47.26%     |
| isiXhosa       | 62     | 17.87%     |
| Afrikaans      | 60     | 17.29%     |
| English        | 36     | 10.37%     |
| isiZulu        | 8      | 2.31%      |
| Xitsonga       | 7      | 2.02%      |
| Setswana       | 3      | 0.86%      |
| Sesotho        | 2      | 0.58%      |
| SiSwati        | 2      | 0.58%      |
| Tshivenda      | 2      | 0.58%      |
| Sepedi         | 1      | 0.29%      |

Source: South African Census (2011)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Based on the most current census data available in 2018.

### *International Call Centre in Bellville*



### **Outline of Chapters**

**Chapter Two** reviews key literature on mobility, diaspora and transnationalism, defining the concept of (im)mobility which is central to analysis in this study. Chapter Two also situates these concepts in an existing body of literature on Somali transnational migration. (Im)mobility and its rippling effects influence "subject making processes" (Al Sharmani, 2007a:13) as well as characteristics associated with "being Somali", expressed as *soomaalinimo*. In this light, the chapter reviews literature on Somali kinship and transnationalism, ICTs and virtual connectivity, mobility and identity to situate the analysis in subsequent chapters on Somali (im)mobility and belonging in a South African context.

In this chapter I have also explained the assumptions made about (im)mobility and ICTs. Like the lives of Somali migrants themselves, internet connectivity and online interactions are also situated in a context of paradoxical (im)mobility. This chapter describes the political context of telecommunications and internet connectivity in Somalia to illuminate the ways in which the government has sought to control information and communication rights and freedoms for Somalis. This puts into perspective how the mobility of information, news, and online data is met with the immobilising arm of the state, and the power of institutional actors to control

mobility. Such factors are important in unpacking the ways in which Somalis navigate public and private life online; the role of the internet in constructing both a Somali homeland and a Somali diaspora; and the role of the internet in constructing new forms of personal and collective identity and habitus (Bourdieu, 1990).

**Chapter Three** outlines the methodology used in this study. It explains the importance of ethnographic and narrative approaches to understanding social context. The chapter describes the challenges and ethical considerations that are inherent to ethnographic methods and anthropological representation, and I share my thoughts on how to navigate these through reciprocity, reflexivity and feminist research approaches. It also describes my personal research journey and how I came to situate my experiences within the framework of feminist digital anthropology. The chapter firstly provides an overview of feminist anthropology, which is rooted in the call for anthropology to apply a critical lens to the question of women's agency and the operating of power through structures and mechanisms of control that create, reproduce and uphold gender norms. Drawing on Schrock (2008) in her presentation of feminist ethnography, this chapter goes on to describe the relationship between research and activism. It situates postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives, while providing an overview of the practical and ethical challenges that emerge in carrying out feminist ethnography, and how to approach these.

Chapter Three argues for the importance of complementing 'traditional' ethnography with feminist and digital ethnography, or, indeed, "feminist digital ethnography." Technology closes distance historically associated with anthropological studies, in which the anthropologist would have travelled around the world to immerse themselves in a "distant land". Digital ethnography forces the anthropologist to put his or her self forward, as much as he or she expects others to during the process of fieldwork. It is an engagement based on mutuality, and transparency is key if the researcher expects participants to participate. For example, I am friends on Facebook with most of those whom I interviewed during the course of this research. Although I am not an avid digital "poster", I do have a digital footprint and my social media is a glance into my personal life, including photos posted by friends and family. One young woman with whom I had connected on Facebook had looked through my photos and said, "I saw a picture of your boyfriend ... it's not good, in Somalia its *haraam*." I recognise the ways in which my research participants came to understand more about me and my life via my online profile, just as I had of their lives and profiles. Digital spaces are important extensions of physical fieldwork sites, and even more so as distinctions between "being offline" and "being online" fade as our lives are increasingly mediated by digital spaces and information. Feminist digital ethnography goes beyond its obvious definition, that being, ethnography via digital platforms



with interlocutors who identify as female. I present the concept of feminist digital ethnography to centrally position the role of virtual spaces in mediating how agency, power and social norms are produced on and through the internet as well as through the body, as intermingled spheres of cultural production and spaces of social and political resistance.

Lastly, I draw on Escobar (1994) to question emerging methodological considerations that arise in the context of studying culture in the context of a digitally mediated world. Escobar notes, “How, for instance, will notions of community, fieldwork, the body, nature, vision, the subject, identity, and writing be transformed by the new technologies? Ways in which life, language and labour (production systems) are produced through technology?” (1994). Anthropology and ethnographic research have an important role to play in the context of digital, and thereby social and cultural, transformations. As digital technologies seep into our lives, disrupting political, economic and social systems, we are at a vital time in history where the technology sector needs anthropology and ethnography to reflect on what it means to be human in a digital age. This dissertation posits that ethnography (driven by human experience) has become a revolutionary and political practice in a world that is driven by digital and data driven knowledge production. This chapter also reflects on this topic in the context of digital ethnography – and the role of digital technologies in supporting researchers to conceptualise and conduct research and analysis beyond fixed places and categories of belonging (while also accessing mobile people). This is especially important with the digitisation of traditional “fields” through which to study multiple identities, relationships, processes and “culture”.

**Chapter Four** seeks to address the political, legal and institutional contexts of mobility, citizenship and belonging as experienced by Somali migrants in South Africa. It sets out to situate Bellville as a place that has become embroiled in the international politics of migrant rights, refugee protection and global human rights discourse. It situates Somali experiences in South Africa in the context of South Africa’s immigration policies and international conventions towards the protection of refugees in order to question the extent to which South Africa’s commitment to migrants and refugees holds strong. The institutional, legal and administrative barriers in negotiating migrant and refugee status and identity in South Africa today form a significant role in configurations of rights and recognition of rights in communities of diversity and mobility such as Bellville. The closure of critically located refugee offices in South Africa, the detention, deportation, legal limbo and criminalisation of non-nationals and the propagation of a discourse of xenophobia through the media are examples of how South Africa has internalised a discourse of “insiders” and “outsiders”. The personal outcomes of navigating institutional, legal and administrative status and belonging contribute to how migrants relate to the urban public sphere – critical to analysis on migrants’ experiences of

navigating the nuances and dynamics of belonging. Belonging emerges from a great deal of negotiation by individuals and communities at both the micro *and* macro levels (Nyamnjoh, 2002:135).

As such, Chapter Four dives into analysis of the political landscapes that impact upon the rights, opportunities and lived experiences for Somali migrants in South Africa. The manner in which countries integrate migrant and refugee rights, such as the right to family reunification, into national policy – and the extent to which bureaucracy enables for administrative access to stated rights – demonstrates the extent of state commitments to supporting cultural diversity by implementing policies built on hospitality and conviviality. A lack of access to stated rights, and the reality of families living apart, whether by choice or not, underpins analysis about the use of information and communications technologies in the context of Somali migration and (im)mobility in South Africa.

Lastly, the chapter discusses how violence against non-nationals is heightened by misinformation, media representations and informational architectures which are used strategically to garner public attention, using foreign migrants as scapegoats. Narratives perpetuated at the state level influence popular perceptions and drive power dynamics at the community level. False news circulating on social media amplifies a context of misinformation and fear surrounding xenophobia and violence in general. Trends toward the spread of misinformation online have the potential to incite fear and discriminatory social norms both across different social groups and within groups, as discussed further in this chapter. Misinformation is amplified by informational architectures online including “echo chambers” and advertisement-driven models of engagement and news consumption on social media. The media plays a significant role in creating public knowledge and narratives on immigration. Misinformation in this context may further amplify the virality of anger and unease in the context of anti-immigrant sentiments. This influences trajectories of social understanding, belonging and conviviality for both migrants and locals.

**Chapter Five** demonstrates the ways in which ICTs assist Somali migrants to maintain and create new social, family and business networks from afar, inviting the potential to live virtually “in between” and across localities. Indeed, ICTs create new frontier spaces for the navigation of space and belonging, throwing aside the distinctive of paradoxes of being online and offline, here and there; an insider and an outsider; and demonstrating the complex and nuanced reality of interconnections, interdependence and conviviality (Nyamnjoh & Brudvig, 2016). Virtual accessibility creates new forms of cultural and political engagement that have enabled Somalis to access kin and community, and actively create new forms of global belonging and



active citizenship online outside of the parameters of the traditional nation-state. The case of the Somali diaspora in South Africa leads us to consider how the “nation” continues to be salient as a category of belonging through online and virtual mediums that lead us to new conceptualisations of “everyday nationalism” that may transcend physical “nation spaces”. Here I question how power is exercised over the individual through online social practices rooted in identity performance and social validation, as well as the design of digital infrastructures which fuel the adoption of national indicators of belonging over frontier-ness.

This chapter draws on Anderson’s (1983) “imagined community” to unpack how technological innovations, and the internet and social media in particular, coupled with a history of mass migration and transnational diaspora have facilitated *soomaalnimoo* (a notion of shared Somali identity or “Somaliness”) that is increasingly united via physical and virtual news travelling. The online realm is a field of socialisation, cultural exchange and reciprocity, invoking memory, nostalgia and future desires. It is, therefore, a significant sphere of inquiry in the context of personal and family relations and aspirations. At the same time, many of my research participants described how technology is “breaking apart families” as youth in particular are increasingly “glued to devices”, changing social interactions and distancing families who may be in the very same room. I have attempted to look at how distance and closeness are managed deliberately through the active agency of individuals, and for what purposes. While most studies about mobility and migration focus on citizenship and belonging from a legalistic or deterministic standpoint – solidifying prescribed notions of Somaliness or other factors of identity affiliated with nationhood or citizenship – there is a need to dig deeper to understand what it means to navigate, and indeed perform, belonging via technologies of mobility. Indeed, ICTs create new frontier spaces as the distinction between being online and offline, and the interplay between real and virtual worlds, are increasingly blurred. With this come perceptions of both positive and negative consequences.

This chapter lastly situates the experience of Somali women and gender roles in the context of Somali migration in South Africa. Much research and media attention on Somali in South Africa have focused on xenophobia, violence against shopkeepers and community peacebuilding. The inclusion of women and women’s experiences from broader understanding is comparatively limited. The role of ICTs and the internet, in particular, is analysed in the lives of Somali women to question if and how these tools afford women the social space to resist or change gender norms and define themselves in new ways. As much as the internet has been empowering to several women interviewed – enabling them to expand their own life choices and exercise agency – their experiences are also situated in a broader context of social anxiety about the public participation of women on and through the internet, and how

this impacts upon family and cultural life. The Somali women who were interviewed have, to some extent, all defied social norms and become more independent and assertive of their rights and voice. They did so often with the support and confidence gained from access to information and social networks on and through the internet, as well as from supportive friends and family members who pushed them towards exercising their voices and seizing leadership roles in their communities. Greater access and use of information technology can help women to expand their life choices in contexts where this was previously denied to them. Technology can increase women's economic, social and political empowerment, as well as support women to claim, demand and protect their bargaining power which I explore in this chapter.

As much as social media platforms provide an avenue for independence, connection and expression, Chapter Five considers as well how social media also potentially enhances mechanisms of social control based on those who claim authority and hierarchy over others, such as in the context of gender and protecting group identity (on the one hand), and the reinforcement of alternative identities (on the other hand). Chapter five addresses the ways in which power is exercised online through digital infrastructures which influence mechanisms of social control and cultural belonging. It explores this topic through analysis of gender which is a prominent theme, as gender relations in society change when "traditional" notions of place, and affiliated ideas of belonging, are disrupted. In this context, the internet and social media are places where women's agency is contested and where women are able to associate freely, claim space, find economic opportunity and have independent voices. In this process, there is also the risk of "false agency" if women are seen to be participating in online public spaces without having personal autonomy about their bodies and decisions, equal opportunity for economic advancement, public leadership and political decision making.

**Chapter Six** recapitulates the main findings and conclusions drawn throughout this research, bringing them into conversation with the main research questions. This study was conceptualised with several key considerations which are recapitulated. Firstly, globalisation has led to increasing mobility and rapidly transforming communities – where almost everyone has been geographically and socially displaced whether across borders or within countries. In this context, there is a great need for research not only about legal frameworks that reinforce articulations and experiences of (im)mobility and configurations of belonging. There is also a need for research about the navigating of frontier identities and experiences "in-between", as people navigate borders, rights, inclusion, and social and cultural belonging. This dissertation addresses this topic, drawing on ethnographic research of Somali migrants in Cape Town.

This dissertation concludes that a combination of legal frameworks related to refugees and migrants, public infrastructures and cultural factors exert a strong influence on Somali migrants' access to rights, social reproduction, identity and transnational belonging. Heightened group consciousness mediated through ICTs may result from social exclusion and perceived prejudices in local communities, which catalyse transnational engagements. Indeed, mobile communications are said to enhance the autonomy and mobility of individuals, enabling people to set up personal connections and access to information without relying on public or institutionally controlled channels (Castells et al, 2007:1). In this context Somali migrants navigate their (im)mobility through ICTs which facilitate their living in "multiple spaces" and "spaces of flows". In many ways, the rise of online social networks and information capital have taken off among Somalis because of their tremendous social organising power in the absence of formal institutions, constraints to legal and social assimilation in host countries and in the context of vastly integrated transnational diaspora networks which sustain economic and social lives.

As such, many Somali migrants live at the margins of (im)mobility – in-between physical and virtual spaces – leading to the navigation of "frontier-ness", challenging taken-for-granted identities related to nationality, gender, religion etc. Participation in social life through online networks and in transnational spaces often challenges common assumptions that identity is necessarily linked to particular places. However, this research simultaneously demonstrates the ways in which borders continue to be emphasised in a world of flows. Contrary to popular assumptions that the internet is transnational, borderless and disassociated with place, this research argues that nations and national spaces – enacted through hubs and nodes – continue to be salient within mobile communities online. While digital platforms may create the conditions for mobility and conviviality, in practice the emergence of conviviality through online spaces is not self-evident. In this context, it is important to understand how digital technologies intersect with identity, culture and social norms offline and online among diverse communities to support new configurations of agency and empowerment.

## **Chapter 2: Unpacking the Literature and Theory on Somali (Im)Mobility, Social Embeddedness of ICTs and Digital Diaspora**

### **The Ubiquity of Mobility and its “Frontier” Identities**

Mobility has become a prominent feature of contemporary social life, not only in terms of physical mobility, but also in terms of social mobility and virtual mobility, and more abstract hopes, desires and aspirations for future mobility. Mobility is, in the words of Adey, “ubiquitous” (2010:1), as it is experienced all the time and in many different forms, including physical movement as well as virtual mobility through mobile phones and the internet and “hoped for” mobility. As the next chapters of this dissertation demonstrate through ethnographic research of the mobilities of Somali migrants in Cape Town, South Africa, life histories have become characterised by mobility. While people and their worlds move around the world, information, services, knowledge, capital and goods also become mobile (Adey, 2010:3). This has created global and local infrastructures of mobility characterised by “spaces of flows” (Adey, 2010:11). Manuel Castells defines “spaces of flows” as, “The material arrangements that allow for simultaneity of social practices without territorial contiguity. It is not purely electronic space ... It is made up first of all of a technological infrastructure of information systems, telecommunications, and transportation lines” (Castells, 1999:295).

This dissertation takes a closer look into such spaces of flows, making distinctive use of the term “(im)mobility” to capture the innate and intertwined paradoxes of mobility and immobility that emerge in such spaces. This chapter unpacks the assumptions made about (im)mobility as it relates to identity, belonging, diaspora, space, place and ICTs. The chapter reviews key literature to support the claim that identity is contested at the margins of (im)mobility – in-between physical and virtual spaces – leading to the navigation of “frontier-ness”, challenging taken-for-granted identities related to nationality, gender, ethnicity, etc. Participation in social life online networks and in transnational spaces often challenges common assumptions that identity is necessarily linked to particular places. This provides the foundation to understanding frontier identities, digitally mediated belonging and, indeed, the paradox of living in multiple worlds simultaneously which, as I argue subsequently, epitomises Somali-ness of being in the 21st century.

Globalisation and its resulting transnational engagements often allude to postmodern “deterritorialised” erasures of borders and mobilities. However, this research simultaneously demonstrates the ways in which borders continue to be emphasised in a world of flows through

political and social control, and processes that define citizens based on insiders and outsiders (Nyamnjoh, 2006). On the contrary to disassociating identity and place, Castells (1999) argues that places – enacted through hubs and nodes – continue to be salient within spaces and infrastructures of flows. His analysis on “grassrooting the space of flows” reminds us that through the “spatial structure of the Information Age ... most people live, work, and construct their meaning around places” (Castells, 1999:296). Anthropologist Arturo Escobar highlights that scholarship has tended to de-emphasise place and to instead highlight global trends and transnational flows, resulting in an, oftentimes, asymmetrical analysis with far too little value given to “place” (2008:7). There is, therefore, a need to neutralize this erasure of “place” through a focus on the roles of space and place in locality, as being key factors intermediating experiences of virtual networks and online platforms. Further, in terms of studies on diversity in African cities, scholars have all too often focused on ethnic conflict and the emergence of nativist sentiments, on violent clashes that are fought over social and political difference. In many ways, these studies propagate a discourse of difference by relying on analytical categories that dichotomize social groups. In the context of mobilities there is a need to encourage a greater research focus on the emergence of cultures of conviviality within the dynamics of space and place (Landau, 2011a:14).

In addition to unpacking the theoretical concept of (im)mobility, the chapter reviews key literature on Somali (im)mobility, focusing on Somali migration, diaspora and transnationalism to provide background to a study of Somali in Cape Town. (Im)mobility and its rippling effects influence “subject making processes” (Al Sharmani, 2007a:13) as well as characteristics associated with “being Somali”, expressed as *soomaalinimo*. I have drawn from the work of Al Sharmani on diasporic Somalis to argue that collective identity is shaped by the rights and living conditions of Somalis living outside of Somalia in their host societies, as well as personal and collective relations with the notion of a homeland (Al Sharmani, 2007c). This chapter reviews literature on Somali mobility, kinship and transnationalism to situate analysis in subsequent chapters on Somali (im)mobility and belonging in the South African context.

The discussions to follow reiterate that experiences of (im)mobility are mediated by the transformative power of telecommunications, and the growing ubiquity of access to a personal or shared smartphone and Wi-Fi networks. Digital communications and services, such as remittances, have become embedded in Somali social and cultural life. Digital communications tools and platforms have networked Somali diaspora communities and their personal and social obligations. This has led to what Baldassar and Merla (2014) refer to as the transnational “circulation of care”, as described in this chapter. The literature reviewed in this chapter sets the scene for understanding Somali transnational lives, and the ways in which

ICTs have supported Somali migrants and their families to navigate frontier states of (im)mobiity, constructs co-presence and navigates collective identity and belonging. Ethnographic analysis on this topic is presented in chapter five.

This chapter lastly unpacks the assumptions made about (im)mobility and ICTs. Like the lives of Somali migrants themselves, internet connectivity, access to a global commons and transnational diaspora engagements are also situated in a context of paradoxical (im)mobility. In this light, I describe the political context of telecommunications and internet connectivity in Somalia to illuminate the ways in which the government has sought to control information and communication rights and freedoms for Somalis. This puts into perspective how the mobility of information, news and online data is met with the immobilising arm of the state, and the quest by powerful actors to control mobility. Such factors are important in unpacking the ways in which Somalis navigate public and private life online; the role of the internet in constructing both a Somali homeland and a Somali diaspora; and the role of the internet in constructing new forms of personal and collective identity and habitus.

### **The Paradox of Living in Multiple Worlds Simultaneously**

This research, and the literature review contributing to its conceptualisation, is based on the position that mobility is conceptually distinct from migration. As Groes and Fernandez (2018) point out,

“While migration has mainly referred to the actual physical, spatial and geographical movement of people, due to poverty, search for labour or seeking new lives in more affluent countries, regions or cities, the concept of mobility not only deals with people’s movement but also the connected flux of materialities, money, ideas, images, knowledge and technologies, and the way such diverse mobilities are restricted, facilitated or understood” (Groes & Fernandez 2018:4).

In our co-edited publication on *Mobilities, ICTs and Marginality in Africa*, Nyamnjoh and Brudvig (2016) argue that physical and social mobility afforded by ICTs allow for frontier-ness as people navigate, negotiate, and indeed, traverse, margins of identity and belonging. ICTs offer new possibilities for overcoming experiences of social exclusion characteristic of being “neither here nor there” and – even more importantly – “both here and there” as emboldened by frontierism (Nyamnjoh 2005, 2011, 2013). ICTs “create new frontier spaces for the navigation of space and belonging and create the distinctive paradoxes of being simultaneously online and offline – and living somewhere between the real and virtual worlds”

(Nyamnjoh & Brudvig, 2016:3). To require frontier people to force themselves into stark dichotomies (“real” vs. “virtual”, “offline” vs. “online”, “here” vs. “there”, “us” vs. “them”, “insider” vs. “outsider”, etc.) is to disregard their nuanced realities which are based on interconnections, interdependence and conviviality (ibid). This gives people, who are inevitably complex, little opportunity or agency to define themselves beyond parochial and ascribed markers of belonging. As Francis Nyamnjoh (2017) highlights, recognising and understanding a social reality that is based on “in-betweenness” and “incompleteness” is necessary to navigate and negotiate both change and continuity, and “bring into conversation various dichotomies and binaries” (Nyamnjoh, 2017:3). Nyamnjoh reminds us further that, “frontier-ness comes from ... continual straddling of myriad identity margins and bridging of various divides.” This perspective encourages a way of knowing that recognises and provides for people’s inevitable “interconnections, nuances and complexities ... made possible or exacerbated by technologically inspired and enhanced mobilities and encounters. In this regard there is an interesting conversation to be had between forms of mobility and the capacity to tame time and space ... and the forms of mobility and presence made possible by new information and communication technologies such as the television, internet , cell and smart phones” (ibid). As we will see in the next sections, ICTs are a critical dimension in the study of “frontier identities”, a concept coined by Kopytoff (1987), referring to the effects and affordances of mobility on identity, belonging and citizenship among mobile people and diaspora communities.

### **Navigating Frontier-ness**

According to anthropologist Igor Kopytoff, the frontier is an in-between space whereby relationships to society and culture are re-negotiated and norms are created and institutionalised. “Frontier-ness” is often navigated through the creative adoption and use of ICTs, which are frontier spaces themselves. Identities forged in and through frontier spaces disrupt stark dichotomies (insider/outsider; citizen/foreigner) and create new possibilities for identity. This provides a basis for conceptualising identity in the context of mobility and complex mechanisms of belonging (Nyamnjoh & Brudvig, 2016:2–3). In this regard, identity is not assumed to fit into neat historical models and categorical assumptions based on nationality, ethnicity, race, gender or other social location. Conradson and McKay use the concept “translocal subjectivities” to describe the “multiply-located senses of self amongst those who inhabit transnational social fields” (Conradson & McKay, 2007:168). This builds off of Appadurai’s notion of “translocality” (Appadurai, 1996) describing the interplay between local and global culture and place making in the context of globalisation and cultural hybridity. As we will see below in the ethnographic data harvested on Somali migrants in Cape Town,

frontier-ness and translocality are key analytical factors to understand how diaspora identity is forged in the process of navigating belonging.

## **Transnationalism in the Contexts of Space, Place and Identity**

### *The Space between Transnational Relations and National Identity*

Questions of displacement, social belonging, the construction of space and the formation of “translocal” communities in a postmodern age of technology are central themes explored in this dissertation. As Victoria Bernal has argued, the intersection of geographic and technological mobilities creates new public spheres and gives rise to new collective subjectivities, significantly transforming community, citizenship and nation. Indeed, analysis at the convergence of migration and (digital) media studies “reveals the ways in which transnational migration, coupled with new technologies of communication, is transforming political participation” (Bernal, 2006:163). Despite “deterritorialised” identities among Eritreans living in the diaspora, communication and civic engagements are, nevertheless, centred on a distant homeland through online channels. A good example is “Dehai”, an online news and discussion website related to Eritrea. Bernal argues that conflict emerges as a central feature in producing a sense of identity, community and the public sphere, which is highly relevant to the Somali diaspora. Similarly, Gerharz (2010) analyses the production of translocality through Sri Lankan migrants who returned home from exile in order to understand the ways in which global and local perspectives intersect in the context of mobility and identity. While Bernal emphasises transnational “virtual” space as transformational to identity, Gerharz argues that, for many Tamils, identity is re-negotiated through physical locality as an “identity space” upon return to the “homeland” (Gerharz, 2010:149). Gerharz counterposes the “local” against the “global” to demonstrate how a locality positions itself in terms of “flows”, “closure” and co-presence. She contrasts face-to-face interactions with virtual interactions via telecommunications to demonstrate the importance of physical co-presence in the case of northern Sri Lanka in the renegotiation of a shared identity characterised as “Tamil”. This literature speaks to the complex interactions of local and global engagements, as well as the roles of space and place in navigating transnational relations and national identity.

### *The Transformative Power of Diaspora Networks*

As Werbner and Fumanti (2012) and Brinkerhoff (2009) point out, “digital diasporas” enable migrants to forge new and “encapsulated” worlds within the nation space, which may



constitute liminal “third” spaces – encompassing both the local and the global realms. Werbner and Fumanti (2012) propose that this diaspora “aesthetics” enables diaspora communities to actively create new performative meaning, highlighting the transformative power of diaspora networks. They argue that this form of mimicry or “mimesis” fuses authentic cultural competencies and subjective selves to create the grounds for appropriation and ownership in the place of non-ownership, or even exclusion. Though mostly “invisible”, diaspora networks emerge to “interrupt cultural narratives of colonial hegemony or national singularity ... to irreversibly transform world politics and imaginaries of nationhood” (Werbner & Fumanti, 2012:151). Werbner and Fumanti draw upon Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy to demonstrate a hybridity of being in the context of transnationalism, and counter Rushdie’s idea of the un-belongingness of migrants who “root themselves in ideas rather than places” (Rushdie cited in Werbner & Fumanti, 2012:156). They argue that diaspora networks capture the ways in which migrants actively and noticeably define their presence, which also redefines subjectivity. Here, I argue that technology plays a central role in this process as it facilitates the creation of networks and connections that are intimately based upon, and linked to, place-based identities, memories and imaginations. This theme will be explored further and substantiated by evidence from our case study in chapter five.

#### *Refocusing on the Socio-political and Economic Dimensions of Space and Place*

Studies on migration and diaspora networks oftentimes rely on analytical categories of being and belonging (such as ethnic or national identity) that epitomise and dichotomise the identity of social groups, thereby underplaying the frontier dimensions of such identities as permanent work in progress. This leaves people little room to define and speak for themselves, as frontier people. In the context of globalisation, increasing urban migration and rapidly transforming communities sustained by mobility, there is a need to shift focus away from an analytical focus on identity, and refocus instead on the socio-political and economic dimensions of space and place. For example, discourses on the integration and assimilation of migrants in South Africa are propagated by essentialising national difference, as migrants are conceived of as belonging to national, religious or cultural groups labelled with discernible features (Sunier, 1995:60). A discourse of difference has led to political debates and popular perceptions of migrants as perpetual “outsiders”, or, in the case of South Africa *makwerekwere*. Differences in culture, language and religion are identified as having been brought from countries of origin. Seen as never quite belonging even if they have lived most of their lives in a host-country, “migrants (or those with the wrong race, ethnicity of geography) feel more and more vulnerable to the growing popularity of the extreme right and of anti-immigration and racial or ethnic purity politics and the policies of various states” (Nyamnjoh, 2006:229). The arguments presented

in this dissertation stem from the need to move beyond academic and policy debates that centre on immigrant “integration” and “assimilation”, highlighting the misalignment of these frameworks with realities of negotiating rights and conviviality in urban spaces. The research presented is based on the assumption of the need to recognise the diverse ways in which migrant communities actively make distinct symbolic space through their own agency and means of cultural reproduction (Alba & Nee, 1997). This approach captures the nuances of frontier identities and cultural hybridities that emerge through interconnectivity, translocality and transnationalism. Indeed, conviviality rests on a fine line of tolerance in the use of public space, offering the possibility of hospitality that is upheld by a degrees of “social cohesion”, but is not exclusive of conflict. According to the African Centre for Migration and Society,

“A cohesive community is not necessarily one in which everyone likes, trusts or agrees with everyone else. Instead, distrust, tension and conflict will always exist between various in-groups and out-groups. Therefore, rather than seeing social cohesion as a – somewhat unrealistic – state in which conflict and dissent are eradicated, we consider social cohesion – at its most fundamental level – to be about the way in which a community of diverse sub-groups deal with (inevitable) social tensions and conflicts” (Monson et al, 2012:19).

Conviviality emerges when the collective interest in avoiding conflict outweighs underlying tendencies towards mistrust, fear and insecurity.

### **Somali Migration, ICTs and Frontier-ness**

Ethnographic studies of Somali society, such as by I.M. Lewis (1961; 1962a; 1962b; 1994; 2002; 2008), Catherine Besteman (1999), Mulki Al-Sharmani (2006; 2007a; 2007b; 2007c), Cawo Abdi (2011), Abdi Ismail Samatar (1997), Said Samatar (1982) and Cindy Horst (2006a; 2006b) provide a base of anthropological knowledge on Somali national identity, migration and diaspora communities, gender and family life. This body of literature includes an ethnographic archive which led to the pioneering of the field of Somali Studies which has brought together a diversity of scholars from across disciplines. I.M. Lewis’s fifty years of study of Somalia provides, perhaps, the most comprehensive ethnographic data on the region to date. However, critics point out his orientalist perspective of Somali society. For example, Somali women are allegedly misrepresented or entirely excluded (Ahmed 1995:159, 169), and possibilities for contrary views, particularly regarding analysis of “clan”, are omitted (Haji, 2010; Al-Sharmani, 2007c). As Christine Choi Ahmed writes, “The unimportance Lewis

attributes to women may be more a by-product of his Western androcentric scholarship than a true reflection of Somali society” (Ahmed, 1995:161). Earlier studies of kinship created a myth of Somali women as having little power, thus solidifying dominant perspectives of the nuclear family, for example. Such perspectives prevent or exclude women’s relations to their own lineage, which are often a vital source of social support (ibid). This has led to an incomplete understanding of modern Somali and diaspora societies, which are, indeed, characterised by mobility and frontier identities, whether related to gender, nationality, clan, etc. Similarly, Lewis’s view of clan affiliations and kinship in relation to conflict in Somalia is contested by Abdi Samatar, Ahmed Samatar, Abdi Kusow and Catherine Besteman who propose more comprehensive explanations for state collapse, including that of social class (Al-Sharmani, 2007c:91). Anthropologist Al-Sharmani highlights the importance of researching beyond the failure of the nation state, to instead question how people experience the “collapse of the nation” after they have fled (Al-Sharmani, 2007c:91). She proposes a questioning and re-evaluation of how Somalis experience sources of difference, such as clan, and construct a national identity from the diaspora. This research addresses Al-Sharmani’s perspective to significantly highlight the fluidity and complexity – indeed, the frontier-ness – of Somali identity in the context of (im)mobility and social change.

#### *Transnational Lives, Networks, Families and Subject-making Processes*

This research builds on existing literature, including work by anthropologist Mulki Al-Sharmani (2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c) which is highly relevant. Al-Sharmani writes about transnational Somali families and the gendering of family support, describing the ways in which Somalis lead and manage their lives through extensive transnational networks of family relations, social obligations and shared resources which are often managed from afar. This transnational way of living becomes an effective strategy to minimise risks to family members, to maximise family resources and capital, and to pursue security and well-being. According to Al-Sharmani, four main dimensions of transnational life include: remittances; transnational strategies of family care; reproduction of family and community relations through technologies such as the internet (such as in seeking marriage partners and caring for children); and arranging movement or travel by making arrangements and financing the move (Al-Sharmani, 2007a).

Digital technologies and telecommunications play a significant role in managing mobility and family life. In their book *Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care: Understanding Mobility and Absence in Family Life* (2014), Baldassar and Merla introduce the “circulation of care” as a framework to study family and migration. They challenge the idea that care relies on physical proximity, and that distance between family members limits

caregiving. Distance between family members often leads to families being labelled as fragmented, but transnational family members routinely “live their lives across geographic distance, retain their sense of collectivity and kinship, and develop practices and processes of ‘doing family’” (Ahlin, 2015:201). As Ahlin describes further, “These practices include the construction of (the feeling of) co-presence by routinely using a mixed set of modes of communication such as email, social media, and telephone to keep in touch” (ibid).

In this light, Madianou and Miller (2012a) expand on the role of various forms of communications media (which they term polymedia), such as information and communication technologies (ICTs), in the lives of transnational families. Their long-term ethnographic study questions how ICTs contribute to the experience of migration and parenting among Filipino mothers, based in London and Cambridge, and their adult children in the Philippines, unveiling both the comparisons and contradictions in the perspectives of mothers and their children. Through this in-depth qualitative case study, Madianou and Miller demonstrate how the political economy of global labour migration, the feminisation of migration, family relationships and care are mediated through new media; and how rapidly expanding opportunity for communication through new technologies has “allowed for a more complete practice of intensive mothering at a distance. ... In that sense, new media can also be seen as a kind of solution (however imperfect) to the cultural contradictions of migration and motherhood” (Madianou & Miller, 2012a:17–8). This sets the stage for a questioning of the dialectical relationship between people and new technology in the context of mobility and migration.

Such transnational networks and engagements among family and kin influence “subject making processes” (Al-Sharmani, 2007a:13) as well as characteristics associated with *soomaalinimo*, a term used to describe “being Somali”. This perception is shaped by the rights and living conditions of refugees in the host society as well as relations with and the idea of a homeland (Al-Sharmani, 2007c). *Soomaalinimo* also encompasses multiple or layered identities shaped from life histories of mobility, resistance and “moral community”. Thus, Al-Sharmani’s questioning of what constitutes a transnational way of life is highly relevant to this study.

#### *Remittances Drive the Transformative Power of Telecommunications for Somali Migrants*

Research by Cindy Horst (2006a) describes the transnational lives of Somali living in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. Horst’s research addresses how mobile Somalis mitigate distance with relatives in Somalia, Nairobi, South Africa, the Middle East, Canada, the United States, Australia and throughout Europe through both digital communications and news travelling via

informal and trusted networks. She notes that, “Physical distance does not necessarily affect the closeness of relationships between them” (Horst, 2006a:9). Popular means of communication at the time of her research included: the *taar* (radio communication transmitters), phone, sending messages and goods via those travelling to a place nearby where relatives live and the *xawilaad*, or *hawala* – a remittance system that enables the transfer of money amongst family and business networks globally.

Somalis in South Africa intimately engage with the diaspora around the world through the *hawala* system. It allegedly takes a few phone calls and one to two days later the money is transferred internationally. It is commission based for those involved but requires no formal paperwork, and is based entirely on trust, efficiency and the strategic location of remittance networks. *Hawala* represents an example of how the mobile phone revolution and the rise of digital networking have contributed significantly to the growing prominence of network-based economies within diaspora mobilities. Network-based systems enable migrants to maintain critical support networks transnationally and to maintain financial security. Jayaram vividly describes how networks function as resource pools and insurance mechanisms in the urban world that is filled with risks and uncertainties (Jayaram, 2009).

#### *Gendered Digital Access for Mobile Somalis*

The growing ubiquity of access to a personal or shared smartphone and Wi-Fi networks has, indeed, transformed the nature of communications and connected families, especially since the time of Horst’s (2006a) study of Somali refugees in Dadaab. A 2018 study of a refugee camp in northern Kenya indicates that 69% of residents own a mobile phone (International Finance Corporation 2018:52–3). According to a study on ICT and internet access in Somalia, “More than seven in 10 Somalis (72.4%) say they personally own a mobile phone” (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2015). The same study notes regional variations, with ownership rates at 78.5% in South-Central Somalia, 73.1% in Puntland and 56.2% in Somaliland. The report also highlights that 51.3% of Mogadishu’s residents connect to the internet each week (ibid), a figure that has likely increased significantly in recent years with the popularity of smartphones and social media as key drivers of internet uptake, and with the rise of a new generation of “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001).

The evolution of mobile phones to smartphones has been significant to internet access and digital participation, especially because the smartphone can be used as a telephone, computer, camera, television, among other adaptations, all in one device. The transition from SMS to internet messaging services such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger has also

driven mobile data use. Ripero-Muñiz and Fayad (2017) highlight that, “Somalis are eager users of social media, both to communicate across borders and to share images and experiences that contribute to the construction of a collective identity in the diaspora” (Ripero-Muñiz & Fayad, 2017:54) Online content contributes to the “formation of a collective identity that takes place in the virtual space of social networks” (Ripero-Muñiz & Fayad, 2017:55).

Research cited in the Women, Peace and Security Index (2017) cites that 85% of Somali women reportedly use a cell phone (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2017). However, a study conducted in five Somali cities – Garowe, Baidoa, Kismayo, Mogadishu and Hargeisa – by the Somali Institute for Development Research and Analysis (SIDRA) (2016) cites that, “A large proportion of the respondents (62%) indicated that in the Somali society, men were the ones with access to and control of knowledge, resources, services and decision making, this compared to a small proportion of the respondents (9%) who selected women” (Somali Institute for Development Research and Analysis, 2016). In light of this divergent access to resources, technology, the internet, and social media represent a significant mode of cultural production for women who are among those with internet access. Access to technology has the potential to enable communication, socialisation and other mechanisms of inclusion. It also has the potential for social control through misinformation and gossip, as chapter five will demonstrate. New internet infrastructures interact with power, cultural values and ideology to reconfigure agency which can have the effect of also creating new constraints.

Garcia et al (2018) suggest that “online social networks, while suffering evident gender imbalance, may lower the barriers that women have to access to informational resources and help to narrow the economic gender gap” (Garcia et al, 2018:1). The internet also provides the possibility to enhance public voice through social media platforms such as Twitter, blogsites and forums. It is a vital component to participation in the global public commons and in negotiating global membership (Ferguson, 2002) in a globalised world of information flows and mediascapes (Appadurai, 1996). In an online interview, Fatuma Abdulahi, a Somali journalist and founder of Warya Post, the first woman-owned media publication in Somalia, explained,

“Women are very active online. They are almost non-existent in traditional media. There, they are mostly young reporters and not owners nor managers. So a lot of them have found the freedom to express themselves online. Without social media, there wouldn’t be as many women photographers and content producers. And they are doing amazing work. Before, the only image you would find of Somalia was a starving woman

with sixteen children. Right now there are several incredible images of the country. A lot of them do not label themselves as activists or even as feminists. They just want to produce good content.” (Africa Blogging: 2016).

*“Being Marginal is Not Necessarily about Being Disconnected from Others”*

Research by Dekker et al carried out with Syrian asylum seekers in the Netherlands shows the value of social media to asylum seekers, whose use of digital platforms was beneficial to access “various types of information, making them less vulnerable to fraud and misinformation” (Dekker et al, 2018:5). Dekker et al highlight the agency of migrants in using social media to “develop strategies to maintain access to social media, to avoid government surveillance, and to validate social media information” (Dekker et al, 2018:9). Anecdotal evidence indicates that on many occasions Somali migrants have taken the lead in bringing connectivity to their mobile communities. For example, Betts et al (2015) cite the case of Abdi, a Somali man who brought affordable internet to Kakuma refugee camp in north-western Kenya:

“Like many others in the camp, he [Abdi] became frustrated with the high costs relying solely on his mobile phone for internet services. Cellular data bundles are expensive and can be exhausted quickly when one is downloading high volumes of data. Abdi learned of an alternative deal for homeowners and small business facilities, in which one can pay a high monthly fee, but receive a large volume of high-speed internet in return. The service was more than what he would need as an individual, but by providing the service to camp customers for a monthly fee of approximately 5 USD, he could provide more affordable internet services to his fellow residents while making a modest profit himself. Paying users are provided with a password, and the IP addresses of their devices are registered to allow them to access the signal, which prevents others from tapping in. The price is much more favourable with this new service: Mobile 3G subscribers can spend over 10 USD per month for limited packets of data, but Abdi’s internet limits downloads by speed, not by data volume” (Betts et al, 2015:28).

As a result, Abdi cites that, “Wi-Fi service has changed life in the camp in many ways. If you need to know something, you just download it. If you need to check your casework with the UNHCR, you can just check it from the comfort of your home. In the past, you had to go to the highway near the Lutheran World Federation office to receive good 3G signal” (ibid). A report by the UNHCR (2016) suggests that 51% of refugees in Africa live in areas with at least a 2G

network connection, and 26% with a 3G connection. In South Africa almost every refugee lives in areas with a 3G network (ibid). Internet connectivity provides a means to communicate and connect with loved ones, create income-generating opportunities, access information and basic services, and organise to become more self-reliant. A report by Nimo-Ilhan Ali (2016) highlights that,

“The availability of broadband Internet in households, university campuses and the ubiquitous internet cafes in major towns means that digital communication is relatively accessible across the Somali regions—for those who can pay ... As young people often note in conversation, topping up internet on their smartphone is one of their biggest expenditures” (Ali, 2016 :31).

As Crystal Powell reminds us in her book on ICTs and rethinking marginality, “Being marginal is not necessarily about being disconnected from others, yet the tendency to equate marginalism with disconnection is subtly present” (Powell, 2014:21). Indeed, internet connectivity has become especially relevant and highly utilised in the context of mobility. In fact, as the UNHCR notes in its research, “[M]any are willing to make large sacrifices to get and stay connected” (UNHCR, 2016:15). Connectivity ultimately empowers individuals to make strategic and informed choices.

### *The Social Embeddedness and Impact of Remittances*

Somalia relies on a political economy of communication, particularly in the context of remittances. Remittances are “the glue that holds many families together” (Hammond, 2010:126). Collins (2009) highlights the importance of being connected in Somalia, particularly considering the significance of remittances which form an economic “lifeline” throughout the Somali diaspora. He argues that personal connections, rather than capital itself, provides for an underlying safety net. Lineage via the Somali clan system provides the basis for connections. However, Simmons (1995) suggests that family is not always the most salient form of social capital, as friends, neighbours and connections made through networks, in the workplace and at school are also called upon for support. A high demand for telecommunications in Somalia stems from the need for financial support and, significantly, the longer term need to maintain transnational social connections from afar for both financial and social reasons. This work is highly relevant to understanding the nature of “connectivity” and virtual engagement in Somalia itself, as well as the distresses that might emerge with not being able to reach others or being disconnected due to political factors or internet shut-downs. Remittances are a way of being present and relevant even from a long distance,



thereby making one's mobility less disruptive to the processes of reproducing sociality and kinship.

Remittances have played a critical role in the Somali economy for decades, forming relationships of dependability between Somalis worldwide. The sheer size of the contemporary diaspora, coupled with recent technological developments in the field of telecommunications and the collapse of the Somali formal economy have added significant weight to the importance of remittances (Horst, 2006c:4). The World Bank estimates that remittances sent from the Somali diaspora to Somalia in 2015 totalled USD 1.4 billion and support 23% of the country's GDP (World Bank, 2016), making Somalia more dependent on remittances than any other country (Ahmed, 2006). According to a 2013 study by Oxfam, Somali-Americans were the highest contributors, and were estimated to have sent an average of USD 3,800 per person on an annual basis (Oxfam, 2013:11). Remittances are significant enablers, allowing the forging of new aspirations for the future as well as prospects for community, economic and social development in the area in which they are received. This is particularly revealing in Dadaab, a region in north-east Kenya on the border of Somalia where refugee camps hosting Somalis are located. Approximately 407,913 refugees reside in the Dadaab area, with a majority of the population having migrated from Somalia (UNHCR, 2013). Refugees living in camps, who are averted and excluded from social and economic integration in host countries, may benefit significantly from global remittances, enabled through digital communications and maintained through networks of trust.

According to the CEO of Dahabshiil – the largest remittance service in Africa, founded by a Somali entrepreneur – technology is a key factor of remittance services. Dahabshiil comments, “Now, it is so instant, where we have the latest technology, with the internet, secure channels that we can use to send money back home ... Or we use mobiles ... smartphones, technology where it will help us to deliver money quickly, but less costly” (Ridgwell, 2017). In addition to being a source of income and financial support, remittances are also critical to the social fabric of a mobile society as a way to preserve social ties. This practice has been termed “gift remitting” (Lindley, 2010). As cited by Cawo Abdi, “The war completely diminished and destroyed the ways of gifting within the Somali cultural system.” As a result, remittances are now “the core gifting system that the Somali society uses today” (Abdi, 2015). Somali migrants in Cape Town communicate via mobile phone applications such as WhatsApp to relatives in even the most distant places, closing the gap, both physical and emotional, between kin and clan. Somalis in South Africa often carry out financial remittances via phones, shops, businesses and warehouses owned by a trusted brotherhood through the *hawala* system. Mobile communications enable Somali migrants to maintain responsibilities and commitments

to their family across the world, financially and emotionally. Mobile phone applications provide mechanisms to actively fulfil social obligations and to play a meaningful role in communities despite physical distance. A “web of obligations” (Hammond, 2010:126) provides a lifeline to and from Somalia for those in exile and those remaining in Somalia. This has strengthened the Somali translocal community, providing a transformative medium for reintegrating social relations and relationships to the state. The significance of digital remittances has become culturally embedded – to the extent that popular Somali-Canadian singer, songwriter and rapper, K'naan, sings about remittances, as highlighted below.

### 15 Minutes Away

Yea, I'm sending this one out to anyone who's had to wait on a money transfer,  
Yea it's kinda whack when they charge you like 10 percent on the dollar  
But you know how good it feels when they say  
You can pick it up today, its 15 minutes away....

The worst thing is the waiting man,  
Its spiritually draining,  
I guess I could repaint it, but don't think I'm complaining,  
I'm in my small apartment,  
This month has been the hardest  
I couldn't afford some omelettes,  
I'm broke like an empty promise  
Sometimes when I'm in a meeting, and everyone else is eating,  
I feel so awkward asking, so I pretend like I am fasting

...

I got my confirmation,  
The western union agent,  
Said grandmas destination,  
Had violent inclination  
But now I'm proud and pacing,  
And walking to the station,  
Heavy precipitation,  
But you can't me anything,  
I got my bills in order,  
I made it cross the border,  
Such dazzles such a horror,  
His life was like an Oprah,  
Grandma I never forget you,  
Worry I never let you,  
Soon as I leave the venue,  
This money I will send you,  
I still haven't gone astray,  
Don't drink or smoke and sway,  
Though sometimes I don't pray,  
It feels so good to say,  
Go out and receive it,  
Cause I just know you need it,  
Your boy has grown up decent,  
Grandma can you believe it?

K'NAAN (2012)

### *The Political Context of Connectivity*

The previous sections of this chapter argued that digital technologies are tools of mobility, with many positive benefits for transnational families and networks. However, digital technologies are also used by the powerful to control the spread of information, knowledge, news and social networking. During the course of this research, there were several occasions where the internet was shut down in Somalia, either by political motives or, in one case, due to undersea cables being damaged by a ship. This cut off Somali internet service providers and their customers from access to global data networks, allegedly costing Somalia the equivalent of approximately \$10 million in economic output (Sheikh, 2017). In another case earlier in 2014, Somalia's Al Shabbab militia banned internet use, seeking to impose a strict interpretation of sharia law. A BBC report noted that, in early 2014, "The al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabab group issued a directive in January ordering all Internet services to be stopped, saying those who did not comply would be seen as 'working with the enemy' and dealt with according to Islamic law" (BBC, 2014). This political context has created great risks to free expression online and hindered the transition to democracy in Somalia. In addition to Somalia, governments around the world have leveraged their power to control citizens and repress information, expression and dissent by interrupting or completely shutting down, the internet nationally or regionally. Internet shut downs have been documented in Cameroon, Chad, Burundi, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, Somalia and Sri Lanka, among other countries, for reasons such as "stopping rumour and disinformation", "exam cheating", "quelling protests" and "elections" (Access Now, 2017; Mukeredzi, 2017). Between 2016 and 2017 there were 183 internet shut downs documented globally, with 29 shut downs occurring on the African continent (ibid). As noted by Julie Owono, digital rights activist and Executive Director of the organisation Internet Without Borders, "Governments that have been used to closed societies where information is centralized see connectivity as a threat rather than an opportunity." Indeed, as cited by Mukeredzi (2017), "The rise in internet shutdowns comes as an increasing number of Africans are communicating via the internet" (Mukeredzi, 2017:9).

According to Adegoke (2017) governments in the Horn of Africa "use filtering, monitoring and surveillance equipment to regulate social media activities and internet communications; and anti-government websites and blogs are blocked" (Adegoke, 2017:4). Article 18 of Somalia's 2012 Constitution provides for the right to freedom of expression and opinion, freedom of speech and freedom of the media, including on all forms of electronic and web-based media. However, the Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) highlights that, "Practices and subsequent efforts to legislate have greatly undermined these

provisions” (CIPESA, 2016:5). A report by CIPESA cites Somalia as “one of the most dangerous countries globally for journalists going by the number of attacks on journalists” (CIPESA, 2016:2). A report by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the right to freedom of expression in Somalia notes that between August 2012 and June 2016, a total of 30 journalists and 18 parliamentarians were killed in Somalia. Moreover, from January 2014 to July 2016, there were 120 recorded cases of arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists and media workers, owners of media houses and publishers. Other incidents cited in the report include “raids and bans on radio and TV stations, the suspension of web-based news, and confiscation of newspapers” (OHCHR, 2016:26). It was explained to me by one interlocutor during fieldwork that, “Al Shabbab doesn’t want people to be connected. They might see someone and say *hmmm* and message others about that person.” Being instantaneously connected is, assuredly, not without risks which are exacerbated in the context of politically motivated insecurity. Allegedly, as it was explained to me by another Somali woman with whom I interacted during the course of this research, much of the Somali music and music videos that are broadcast on YouTube are created by Somali diaspora singers and artists, as the risks to broadcasting entertainment content are high in Somalia. News websites are often also created by members of the diaspora about news and happenings in Somalia. For example, as one woman explained to me, there are one or two specific websites “that everyone uses” with news and information relevant to Somalia. She explained that these websites are maintained by Somali journalists in Netherlands because “they would not be able to write this in Somalia”.

In the absence of national human rights standards for internet rights, the field of digital technologies and telecommunications infrastructure becomes an open field for syndicates or political gatekeepers who are able to opportunistically monitor or control citizens’ communications, access to networks and the spread of ideas across borders. Further, in December 2015, the parliament of Somalia passed a controversial law that has been seen by critics as regressing media freedom. It requires, among other things, “a minimum of a university degree in journalism and passage of a special examination administered by the Somalia Media Commission to practice journalism in the country” (CIPESA, 2016:5), as well as for journalists to be registered with a media regulatory commission. Its aim is to prohibit the media from disseminating “false news”, “escalation of hostility”, “encouragement of tribalism”, “baseless propaganda against person or institution”, “hate news” and “news based on extremism” (Somali Broadcasting Corporation, 2015). The law would apply to the more than 1,000 websites operated by Somalis in the diaspora (Koronto, 2016). The policing of the media

and perils of online censorship, and surveillance threaten the freedom of the press, as well as privacy and anonymity that allow people full self-expression, group organising and indeed democratic engagement on the internet. Indeed, although countries around the world have guaranteed a constitutional right to media freedom and freedom of expression, the vast communication potentials of the internet and social media have fundamentally changed citizens' access to information and organising potential, and power. This has illuminated the unwillingness or incapacity of governments to guarantee information and communication rights and freedoms for their citizens.

### *Digital Technologies Are Not a Panacea*

Digital technologies are not a panacea, nor are they so readily accessible and available to all. Access to ICTs is mediated by social hierarchies, particularly related to gender, age, income and education, leading them to be exclusive. This has the negative consequence of fostering and increasing distance between digital “haves” and “have nots”. In 2017, 48% of the world was connected to the internet. It is predicted that the world will meet the 50% mark – with half of the world connected to the internet – in 2018. However, substantial digital divides continue to exist between countries and regions, and within countries (International Telecommunications Union, 2017a). The International Telecommunications Union has stated that, “People in Europe are more than three times more likely to access the Internet regularly than those in Africa, and are likely to benefit from higher access speeds when doing so” (International Telecommunications Union, 2017b:2).

Beyond this, statistical data reported by governments to the central United Nations body governing telecommunications (the International Telecommunications Union) revealed that the digital gender gap has increased. The gender gap appears to have grown significantly in Africa, where just 18.6% of women have access to the internet compared to 25% of men (International Telecommunications Union, 2017b:2; Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2016). Demographic factors such as age and education are major factors influencing women's internet access and participation online (World Wide Web Foundation, 2015). For example, the gender gap in connectivity decreases with higher levels of education (ibid). The prohibitively high cost of internet services is also a major factor driving the digital gender gap (Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2017). Being offline – or having limited connectivity – leads to missed connections, information and opportunities.

In addition to missed opportunities resulting from digital exclusion, online activity also has the potential to reinforce inequalities. Research by Nikiwe Solomon has demonstrated that ICTs

may also work to reinforce the status quo and be used as a tool to reign in power when it is challenged (Solomon, 2016). Solomon highlights that while the cell phone may enhance Zimbabwean migrant women's communication and social positioning while living in Johannesburg it is also used as a tool for policing personal social networks and digital surveillance of communications by domestic partners. This leads to the continuation of adverse gender norms, patriarchal hierarchies and the silencing of women. This is especially pronounced with the increasing trend towards data-driven communications (e.g. SMS, email and chat and voice messaging through mobile internet) which is quickly replacing voice communication (e.g. phone calls). Data-driven communication produces a lasting material record and archive of personal communications, search histories and data collected stored through the use of digital and mobile services. Digital surveillance through the vast datafication of personal communications may have the unintended effect of limiting personal freedoms of privacy, mobility, association and of communication often associated with the cell phone and internet technologies (Gangadharan, 2017). Furthermore, technology researchers have illuminated the fact that the operating systems of older generation smartphones, as well as cheaper Android smartphone devices, have reduced security features, making their users more susceptible to surveillance and malware attacks. This disproportionately targets lower income earners and those who choose to spend less income on a smartphone.

Many studies on ICTs are conceptually framed in an ICT for development (ICT4D) framework that situates digital technologies in the context of political, economic, social and behavioural change, often taking a technological deterministic and "techno-populist" standpoint. Technological populism is a term used by Evgeny Morozov referring to "the idea that somehow we can fight our way out of crisis if only we build the right coalitions within various sectors in Silicon Valley" (Morozov, 2016). This sort of "cyber-utopianism" contributes to a propensity to view all political and social change as a result of digital technologies. However, the online realm often replicates and potentially exacerbates the world's existing inequalities – including those related to gender, class, race, disability and other lines of identity. ICTs are enablers that are reflective of the social worlds of those who create and those who appropriate them, and towards what purpose. The relationship between people and digital technologies is also influenced by various degrees of control, (im)mobility and hierarchical relationships that are both local and global.

## **Conclusion**

The rapid diffusion of digital technologies that has taken place since the late 1990s is primarily characterised by the proliferation of the internet, social media, cell phones and smartphones.

The popularity of ICTs has made global interconnectedness, and indeed, the prospect of belonging to a universal global commons, possible for populations usually considered marginalised. Indeed, mobile phone and internet adoption across Africa has risen steadily, a situation that has changed dramatically since Castells's description of "Africa's technological apartheid at the dawn of the information age" (Archambault, 2011:445). Since the early 2000's, cell phones have become vital to everyday life throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa (Archambault, 2013:88). Despite increasing rates of access to smartphones and the internet, digital divides do persist – with just 21.8% of the total population in Africa having access to the internet in 2017. However internet adoption by youth is rising steadily with 40.3% of people aged 15-24 accessing the internet (International Telecommunications Union, 2017a). As others have also argued (De Bruijn et al, 2009; Horst & Miller, 2006; Archambault, 2012, 2013; Madiano & Miller, 2011), owning a cell phone creates the possibility for membership in a globalised world of increasingly elusive participation and cross-border mobility.

As social and communicative tools, ICTs are actively appropriated as tools to overcome distance and to form new networks of conviviality. People are able to extend their social worlds via ICTs as social tools, thus challenging common assumptions of space and place as being linked to particular people and processes. Thus, ICTs pose as a unique gateway, offering the potential for reconfiguring social architecture and belonging in the context of (im)mobility. However, as this chapter has also explained, ICTs are not a panacea. In addition to being a force of mobility, they also have the potential to be a force of immobility and political and social control.

This chapter has reviewed key literature related to Somali mobility, transnationalism and ICTs, unpacking the concept of frontier identity and how it manifests in the context of physical and virtual (im)mobility. Digital communications via ICTs greatly enhance the translocality of Somali migrants, whose social and cultural practices, such as care giving and remittances, are embedded within digital infrastructures and widespread social networks. This is particularly significant for families, who are able to leverage ICTs for social and care purposes as well as economic transactions, thus securing important means of support. Such practices contribute to new diasporic identities, characterised by mobile subjectivities which are defined on and through technology, as frontier identities. Understanding Somali identity in the context of frontier-ness, intersecting (im)mobilities and ICTs makes possible a blurring of the distinction between belonging "here" or "there" in terms of geographic locations and nation spaces. The next chapter will discuss the methodology used in studying ethnographically what it means to be a frontier Somali in South Africa, and the challenges and opportunities for anthropology in studying digitally networked people in frontier spaces.



## **Chapter 3: Methodological Considerations for a Study of Mobility, In-Betweenness and Digital Anthropology**

This study made use of a variety of qualitative and narrative techniques, including ethnography and participant observation, direct interviews and digital ethnography to explore the topic of Somali (im)mobility, transnational belonging and digital technologies. This chapter presents the research methods and process, describing both the opportunities and challenges associated with researching digitally-mediated social worlds through ethnographic techniques. Digital spaces are important extensions of social worlds and should, therefore, become critical to every anthropological field site and ethnographic research study. This is ever more important as distinctions between being offline and being online fade, and as our “frontier” (Kopytoff, 1987) lives are increasingly mediated by digital spaces and information (Nyamnjoh & Brudvig, 2016). As Tom Boellstorff highlights, “Technology is now ubiquitous worldwide, and few, if any, future fieldwork projects could ever constitute ‘ethnography unplugged’. If digital is nothing more than a synonym for internet-mediated, then all anthropology is now digital anthropology in some way, shape or form” (Boellstorff cited in Horst & Miller: 2012:12).

Exploring the digital also poses challenges to defining a field site and, indeed, a social group to study. I argue that digital ethnography provides transformational opportunities to step away from anthropology’s traditional reliance on bounded notions of place, community and shared identity factors (such as ethnic or national identity) that are often associated with particular places as central analytical factors (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997a). This is especially important as ICTs become critical constitutions of the everyday. ICTs are increasingly central to social, economic, political, emotional and cultural life, not only for many who regularly access new technologies, but also for those who don’t have access, as information flows, networks and communications are increasingly digitising in media and institutions. Ethnography and its narrative techniques are well suited to studying culture in a digitally mediated world. Digital anthropology and digital ethnography also provide a framework through which to understand the centrality of mobility and frontier-ness to culture today.

Anthropology and ethnographic techniques are also vital tools and offer important perspective in the context of society’s increasing attention to big data and quantitative driven insights. In many cases – though, there is a potential for big data (or, analysis of large digital datasets) to deliver important insights – knowledge produced through quantitative techniques is clearly distinct from thick data, characteristic of ethnographic data and analysis through interpretative methods. There are important distinctions and complementarities to be understood between

big data and thick data, as they lead to diverse epistemological “ways of knowing”, which determine how we come to understand and treat social issues and complex cultural phenomena (as well as transformations associated with the results of data).

This chapter also discusses the role of reflexivity and interpretative approaches in anthropological research and analysis, while sharing ethical considerations that emerged in the research process. Anthropology, as all research disciplines, is based on a politics of representation that is shaped by methodologies and ethics of engagement. Navigating and negotiating the politics of representation begs the questions: who stands to benefit from the anthropological endeavour, and towards what end? To address these questions, in this chapter I define and situate feminist fieldwork – its significance, ethics and practicalities, and how it challenges “traditional” ethnographic objectivity. Feminist ethnography pushes ethnographers to listen to women’s voices, to apply a critical lens to the question of women’s agency, and to engage in research that is socially and politically relevant to people we study. This is important because women’s voices and perspectives (including Somali women) are often marginalised or wholly absent from dominant public and political narratives, including narratives on their own representation. Incorporating women’s voices and perspectives is central to ethically engaging with questions of representation, as well as accurately understanding culture and power, place-making and people-making (Gupta & Ferguson, 2001:24–5). Towards this end, I discuss the role of subjectivity, embodiment, reciprocity and reflexivity in feminist ethnographic practice. I describe arising ethical and epistemological issues and solutions surrounding the politics and ethics of representing others in research, as well as how feminist anthropology provided a framework to guide me through critical issues of engagement and representation of Somali migrants in Cape Town.

This chapter also reviews relevant concepts and literature on digital anthropology and digital ethnography that have shaped thinking and practices in this area. Considering the novelty and evolving nature of such fields, this chapter situates how to conceptualise and negotiate methodologies in the era of digitalisation of life, while presenting the new idea of feminist digital ethnography. Feminist digital anthropology/ethnography is well suited to study both the adoption and use of digital technologies, on the one hand, and how virtual spaces intersect with power and agency in everyday lives to give rise to new forms of mobility and possibilities for social and political resistance, on the other hand. Feminist digital anthropology/ethnography was particularly useful to a study of mobile Somali as this approach (conceptually and methodologically) recognises the ways in which identity is transnational (dispersed through nodes and nation-places) and permanently on the move as a response to unfolding experiences of layers of power, domination and resistance in everyday life.

This chapter ends with key methodological questions and considerations about representation and “writing culture” in a digital age. I argue that the intersection of digital and feminist ethnography and anthropologies presents important questions regarding the decolonisation of knowledge production both methodologically and analytically. In lieu of the many possibilities for self-representation on and through digital technologies – and in light of the variety of means to engage across cultures, societies and traditional hierarchies online – I conclude this chapter with the ongoing question: can and should the anthropologist continue to represent others? Furthermore, how can anthropology harness the unique power of digital spaces and multiple mediums, including visual, oral and written, to support knowledge production and cultural understanding through self-representation?

### **Fieldwork: A Story of Friendship and “Intimate Strangers”**

I initially started research on the topics of mobility and ICTs when carrying out ethnographic research for my Master’s degree in Social Anthropology in 2012. During this research, I analysed the emergence and nature of conviviality in Bellville to better understand its popularity as a destination for migrants from diverse countries including Somalia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania, Angola, Mozambique, Kenya, Jordan, Pakistan and Bangladesh amongst others. Many migrants settled in the area seeking work and income-generating opportunities, such as informal trading, shop keeping, and other livelihoods, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 xenophobic outbreaks. In this research, it was evident to me that networks and infrastructures of mobility, such as ICT infrastructures, the internet and the Bellville train station (central for many commuters’ access to the city and to commercial spaces), were foundational to people’s association with, understanding of and trust in the place, leading to a sense of mutuality of belonging and conviviality in Bellville.

For example, it is common to find people gathered around internet cafes and TVs in Bellville, a popular destination for Somali migrants in Cape Town, to get updates on international news. This was evident to me in my first observations of Bellville during a period of ethnographic fieldwork done between 2012 and 2013. I noticed that Al Jazeera is a popular news channel played in several public restaurants, such as Restaurant Dur Dur. As Somali journalist, Abdulahi Qorshe, who works for Somali National Television and who now lives in South Africa explained to me, “With Al Jazeera you can learn about Somali and Kenyan news. Many Somalis live in Kenya, you see, and we want to know what is going on”. He remarked further, “A lot of people watch local stations which are full of television dramas. We are looking for the international news.” News and information exchange play a significant role in Somali diaspora

communities in order to maintain relationships with Somalia and with global political predicaments around the world, which family, friends and Somalis in general may face in everyday life. This led people who claim Somali identity to become avid internet users. One man explained to me that, “We mostly use social networks.” In another context, the owner of an international call centre in Bellville, explained, “People in Bellville call all over the world, mostly Kenya, Somalia, Europe and America.” Bellville is an internationally connected locality, transnational in every way through its Somali diaspora which is increasingly representative of emerging cosmopolitanisms.

Through its Somali community, Bellville represents the idea that the “local is not just the other side of the global” but rather that the local and the global interact to produce spaces that are representative of global flows (Parthasarathy, 2009; Piot, 1999). Being a largely immigrant residential and commercial business trading community, the notion of “collective” habitus in Bellville’s central business district is informed by common understandings of uprooted, transitory life and the insecurities endured and mitigated through strategic mobility, supported by various technologies of mobility. Clifford’s (1997) suggestion of “dwelling-in-travel” or “travelling-in-dwelling” describes the liminal (“frontier”) zone of Bellville as the place extends beyond its own geographic locale to involve transnational networks that are critically supported by ICTs. For many, Bellville has become a home away from home. However, it is also a place that is characterised by temporary heritage, a chapter of one’s life that concludes far from the city – either in a place called home or, for many, reunited with family regardless of locality. For Somali, the practicalities of home, family, news, information and capital are dispersed around the world through nodes and social histories of mobility. For many, these have or will intersect at some point in South Africa. Within Cape Town and South Africa by extension, Bellville is a critical place where social capital and economic opportunity accumulate and are accumulated both for Somali and other migrant communities.

When conceptualising and commencing this PhD research, I was especially interested in the digitally mediated lives of Somali migrants, particularly in the context of increasing insecurity and violence targeted at Somali migrants in South Africa, as well as contestations over multiculturalism and belonging in urban South Africa. Since this topic extended from my previous research in Bellville, I had already developed good relationships with several Somali contacts and friends, and the two studies flowed quite seamlessly from one to the next, conceptually and methodologically. My PhD research relied largely on snowball sampling, meaning that interlocutors who agreed to participate in the research helped me to recruit future interviewees from among their friends, family and acquaintances. It was somewhat easier to find participants for my PhD research than when starting my Master’s because I had already

developed friendships and a level of trust with an initial group of participants, who also had participated in interviews for my Master's research. This level of trust made it more likely that participants would be willing to introduce me to others, or to include me in group gatherings, such as graduation ceremonies of the Somali Association of South Africa's educational programme, or friendship outings, meetings and discussions.

One factor that likely increased participants' interest and trust in the research process was my inclusion of participants and community leaders as reviewers of my previous publications on the topic. For example, when publishing my Master's thesis I gave the main interview participants authority to provide input and comments on the content of the thesis. My research was published as a book and disseminated within the Somali community in Cape Town, NGO networks and to key informants, which I believe also made participants proud to be associated with research activities. Additionally, the book was accessible both in paperback and e-book format and made available for preview on Google, which made it available and accessible to Somalis elsewhere beyond South Africa. However, as much as this research attempted to locate and place itself in a given locality – in this case, Bellville – the study was actually multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) in that research took place both online and in offline spaces. This sort of multi-cited and mobile ethnography “moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space” (Marcus 1998:79).

When I initially started my research in Bellville and its Somali community, I decided to volunteer as an English teacher with the Somali Association of South Africa and assisted with their new and emerging English language instruction programme. I already had experience volunteering as an English teacher at another affiliated non-governmental organisation, the Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town, which provides educational classes and services for refugees and migrants (not specific to Somali). It was through my volunteering that I was introduced to the Somali Association of South Africa and several Somali contacts who were instrumental to helping me understand the issues of importance to Somalis in general and in Bellville in particular.

Identifying people to participate in interviews and the process of conducting ethnographic fieldwork often begs one to wear different hats to gain access and build personal relationships and solidarity. At the onset of my research, I was able to develop a higher level of trust being in the role of “teacher” rather than “researcher”. This is an interesting distinction to reflect upon in the context of conducting ethnography and the different subjectivities we embody and strategically adopt (or aim to distance ourselves from) as we enter and strive to understand

social worlds, and navigate our own vulnerability as actors wearing multiple, interchangeable hats in new social spaces. Bennett and Pereira (2013) present this experience through the metaphor of “jacketed women” – with the jacket being an interesting symbol for the ways in which our embodied history and habitus “affect our intellectual and imaginative selves, organise our bodies and minds ... and present us to the world” (Bennett & Pereira, 2013:3). As researchers, our “jackets” can be both enabling and constraining in the process of questioning underlying assumptions about ourselves, the field of research and participants of study.

At the start of this research I volunteered teaching English to a group of ten Somali students for six months. Among this group, I conducted further participant observation with several students. For example, one student, a young woman, approached me for additional help in learning to read and write English. We spent time together outside of the classroom, hanging out at her family’s trading stall with her sister, where the two young women worked selling fashion merchandise such as bags, hats and belts, and occasionally visiting her family’s home which was in a large apartment building around the corner from the shop. Although she spoke almost perfect English, having lived most of her life in South Africa, she did not have a formal education and desperately wanted to learn to read and write and, as she revealed, to become a doctor. Another student and I became friends on Facebook where we continued to chat, and I occasionally visited his shop to catch up in person. Other contacts were not directly affiliated or identified through a formal organisation or its services, but were people I was introduced to through others, whom I knew before starting research specific to my PhD, and who kindly agreed to participate in interviews. Twenty-five individuals in the Somali community of Cape Town were interviewed in the research, and ten interlocutors were engaged in participant observation over the course of five years. Additionally, conversations with a Somali academic, two representatives from a Somali telecommunications company and NGOs and other activists working on gender, digital equality, migration and human rights policy issues informed the analysis. Majority of the names referenced in this ethnography are pseudonyms, except in few cases where participants specifically expressed that they would like their names attributed to their views.

After about a year of fieldwork and research towards my PhD, an exciting opportunity came my way involving full-time work with an organisation carrying out research and advocacy on internet and digital rights policy issues, and specifically on the topic of gender and ICT. My research at the World Wide Web Foundation was not part of my PhD fieldwork. However, working there and simultaneously completing my PhD, greatly informed my knowledge and understanding of emerging issues and debates around access to and use of digital

technologies, gender issues online and the internet and human rights. As part of my job, I coordinated research on the topic of the gender digital divide in ten countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America (including Kenya, Uganda, Mozambique, Cameroon, Nigeria, Egypt, Colombia, India, Indonesia and the Philippines), working with diverse NGOs and women's organisations to study the issues of concern in each of the regions. As mentioned, while this was not formally part of my PhD research, it certainly continued to shape my perspective and passion for researching the critical impact of digital technologies on mobilities, particularly in marginalised communities, and on public issues emerging at the intersection of technology, gender and human rights, particularly in the global South. This was a topic that I had done quite a bit of work on while co-editing a book published by the Human Sciences Research Council Press, *ICTs, Mobility and Marginality: Comparative Perspectives from South Africa* (2016), at the invitation by my supervisor Professor Francis Nyamnjoh. These experiences were central to my own ethnographic and theoretical understanding of technology access and use, their impacts on social inclusion and equality, and the particularities of digital mobility across cities of the global South.

#### **Navigating Research-Work Balance During Ethnographic Endeavours “At Home”**

In the period of my fieldwork during which I was simultaneously working, my research had to be more routinely scheduled than when I was a “full-time” ethnographer and PhD student. Whereas in the first year of my research, I had fewer work commitments and more time to volunteer in Bellville, spend all day hanging out and simply wander around speaking to people; upon juggling full-time and then part-time work, I needed to schedule appointments with interlocutors in order to ensure they would be there and to make the most of our time together. Ethnographers “at home” need to negotiate time and the boundaries of where “home”, “work” and “field-site” start and finish. This negotiating of time, does, in hindsight, shift the possibilities that can be afforded by “timeless” ethnography, characteristic of “deep hanging out”. However, the notion that an ethnographer has no other commitments than to one's field-site and participants is unrealistic. This is especially so for ethnographers who are also caretakers of others – mothers, for example; as well as recognising that individuals have different social, informational, and emotional limits determining how “productive” they might be both in the field and in other aspects of life, such as work, socialising, etc.

**“If you are willing to take a thousand steps you should take the first one”**

During the period where my fieldwork was more “scheduled” than was previously the case, interviews and discussions took place at the shared office of one of my “protagonist”

interlocutors. After I had not seen Aisha for several months, we connected and she asked me to meet her at an address on Durban Road in Bellville. I was not familiar with the building, assuming it was a shop or office where Aisha was now working. Upon arrival I discovered that it was a large building that housed a technical vocational training school, an academy offering high school courses, a credit rescue business, an organisation offering legal services and several other offices including an accounting firm which I was to meet my friend. I arrived and the security guard asked me where I was going, I said I'm meeting a friend. Aisha was running late so she told me to go to the accountancy firm on the second floor. I went upstairs and went into the office where two friendly men, Bashir and Abdiwasir were seated at their desks. Bashir was older, in his early 40s, married with children, while Absiwasir unmarried and in his twenties. I was offered a banana and a seat on comfy sofa. Aisha had told Bashir I'd be meeting her there. Bashir had a photo of himself graduating from university on his desk. I told him about my research and we spoke at length about his ten years in South Africa. Bashir and Abdiwasir started an accounting firm together several years ago, which was just one of several of their businesses, providing services to Somali entrepreneurs and others in Bellville. Abdiwasir a graduate of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), is a bright-eyed man with round glasses who loves football, and had soccer paraphernalia on his desk next to his desktop computer. Many people ask him why he doesn't work in a shop like many young Somali men his age, but he always wanted to study. He completed an internship before co-founding the business with Bashir. Abdiwasir would like to conduct research about why Somalis are good at business. Since he has been successful in his work, he wants to give back to the community and plans to one day start a community-based organisation together with Bashir to address the problem of school drop-outs through peer education. In the office was a white board where the business partners would write an inspirational quote of the day, which Bashir would explain to me whenever I visited their office. My favorite quote was written on 21 July 2017, *"If you are willing to take a thousand steps, you should take the first one."*

This office represented, for me, a "home base" in the period of my work-fieldwork balance where I could conduct interviews with individuals and not become stressed out if they didn't show up after my travelling almost an hour to meet them, or if they arrived an hour late themselves. It was a place where I was always made to feel welcome and could always find a friendly conversationalist, a comfortable seat and, to my gratitude, snacks and an inspirational quote of the day. Upon leaving on my first visit to this building, the parking guard asked me why I was visiting and if I will be returning, to which I responded "we will meet again".



During the time of my PhD fieldwork, between 2013 until 2018, in addition to visiting Bellville and going on outings with my established contact, I kept in touch with my Somali friends and contacts online through social media – where I connected with most of my fieldwork contacts – and during in-person meetings and interviews. I also used digital ethnography and media tools to review and analyse relevant news articles, trends in discussions on Twitter hashtags and blogs, YouTube videos by journalists and activists, and debates on Facebook and relevant online forums. Since the online realm is a place where people post their comments and views via news stories, blog posts and public channels, this medium is extremely useful, and should go hand-in-hand with face-to-face interviews and interactions. In fact, in many cases the content and discussion threads posted through online channels were an obvious place to engage in participant observation. Online posts such as Twitter status updates, hashtags and online forums are representative of people's thoughts and opinions, whereas, I have observed that, while being interviewed myself, there is a tendency to relay responses and information that the interviewee thinks the interviewer wants to hear. Online platforms also triangulated the "partial truths" that I could piece together from offline interactions, observations and interviews. Indeed, the online realm is an important extension of the field site, and plays a significant role in narrative techniques and understanding social context.

One challenge and limitation that I endured, both in offline and digital ethnographic encounters, is the fact that I don't understand or speak the Somali language. Indeed, I analysed much of the online content that was not in English with the assistance of Google Translate. Language barriers also limited with whom I was able to interact on a convivial and informal basis, and particularly women, some of whom have limited command of English, but may speak several other languages such as Swahili and Arabic, in addition to Somali. As Brown also noted in her ethnography of Somali women in Bellville, "Negotiating language barriers is a complex issue" (Brown 2014:34). I explored working with a research assistant to support the translation of interviews, but this didn't work out – largely due to my taking a break from the research and losing touch and re-entering the field while working part-time, only to find out that those whom I had spoken to about assisting with the research were no longer available due to other work commitments (but they did help out with identifying several interviewees and participating in multiple interviews themselves). When chatting and interviewing some of my interlocutors, online tools proved to be immensely helpful, as we could both use Google Translate and therefore communicate much more fluidly. Individuals whose English was limited may have been less inclined to particulate in the research. Online language translation services can be useful in helping to virtually cross borders and barriers of understanding. It was interesting to observe that upon commencing the research, I had attempted to translate Somali news articles online, but at that time, Google did not yet support

Somali language translation. Towards the end of 2013, Google added Somali and nine other languages to its translation service, demonstrating that Somali was prioritised as a need, or opportunity, for tech-giant platforms like Google. However, Somalis were in uproar online and voiced concern in a blog describing that Google translate detects absolute gibberish as being Somali, for example: “ooga booga wooga” is detected as being Somali language (Dahir, 2017b). One man lamented on Twitter:

“@Google hire me to fix your translations b/c your Somali's broker than my wallet 😂  
#BadSomali.”

This is just one example of the importance of complementing digital ethnography with people-centred and participatory approaches to social research. Digital platforms and their algorithms often replicate human bias, misunderstanding and even discrimination based on dominant knowledge paradigms of those who have the power to produce and categorise knowledge and information systems.

This research revealed to me the importance of complementing “traditional”/conventional ethnography with digital ethnography, or, indeed, “digitising ethnography” through interactions via social media, analysis of digital media and online data. This included both official data and individually generated information. I agree with the point made by Tom Boellerstoff that the digital is not always an object of study per se, but rather “a methodological approach, founded in participant observation, for investigating the virtual and its relationship to the actual” (Boellerstoff cited in Horst & Miller, 2012:13). Further, “we can no longer treat the virtual and the physical as distinct or separate” (ibid), especially when we are researching people who, like Somali, believe in and see interconnections of many kinds. Technology closes the distance historically associated with anthropological studies in which the anthropologist may have travelled a far distance or even around the world to immerse him- or herself in locality or topic of study. Digital spaces are important extensions of physical fieldwork sites, evermore so as distinctions between being offline and online fade as our lives are increasingly mediated by digital spaces and information. There is a similar mutuality and friendship surrounding research using digital ethnography as there is in conducting “traditional” ethnography. Digital ethnography forces the anthropologist to put him- or herself forward on online platforms, as much as he or she expects others to. Digital ethnography is based on mutuality, blurring the dichotomies between watching and being watched, or observed. In the case of platforms such as Twitter where new contacts and networks are formed, and where I reached out to several Somali activists, there is a sense of being “intimate strangers” (Nyamnjoh, 2010).

## **Studying Culture in a Mobile, Transnational and Digitally Mediated World**

In her book *Ethnography for the Internet* (2015), Christine Hine highlights that ethnography is a well-suited method to critically unpacking and understanding assumptions about the impact of new technology in society. This includes using ethnographic techniques to investigate how technologies are “adopted and adapted to our lives”, how social structures are made and to assess challenges and means of coping (Hine, 2015:2). In her discussion of this, she poses a critical challenge of questioning practically where ethnographers should go, and what we will do when we get there. Furthermore, “To rely on only one medium when the participants involved have many different ways of communicating and representing themselves to each other could be problematic, and jeopardise that rounded, holistic understanding that ethnographers aim to develop” (Hine, 2015:2).

Hine argues that ethnographers should take part in diverse interactions and forms of communication including face-to-face interactions that may be mediated by communications technologies. This may also complicate the ethnographer’s ability to make total sense of the situation. She provides the example that only hearing one end of a conversation or seeing someone’s facial expressions while they are communicating on a device may leave much for interpretation. However, I would ask further, isn’t such the nature of ethnography, in that we are always subjected to “partial truths” (Clifford, 1986). Ethnography is as much about “what is said” as what is “not said”, which oftentimes equally sheds light on the topic of study. Indeed, the interpretative approach to anthropological analysis is central to making sense of and recognising symbolic meaning (Geertz, 1972 & 1973). Studying digitally mediated cultures through ethnographic techniques and online mediums may actually help to shed light onto “what is not said” or “missed observations”, as it is an important medium of cultural transmission. The experiential and observational techniques of ethnography offer promising scope to studying digitally mediated cultures beyond the fixed parameters of nation and place, through which we have historically come to understand cultural practices.

Escobar (1994) provides food for thought on the emerging methodological considerations that arise in the context of studying culture in a digitally mediated world. Escobar questions, “How, for instance, will notions of community, fieldwork, the body, nature, vision, the subject, identity, and writing be transformed by the new technologies?” Indeed, my method in participant observation took into consideration Gupta and Ferguson’s challenge to the idea of bounded culture; that is, “the idea that ‘a culture’ is naturally the property of a spatially localised people

and that the way to study such a culture is to go ‘there’” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997b:3). The critical writing of anthropologist and journalist Sarah Kendzior resonates with me. She writes,

“Anthropology of the internet challenges paradigms and practices that have been part of the discipline since its inception. The most notable methodological divergence concerns what many consider the hallmark of cultural anthropology: long-term ethnographic fieldwork. In anthropology of the internet, there is no clear sense of a field site or of ‘time spent in the field.’ (The researcher is either always in the field, or, naysayers claim, never in the field). The boundaries of the field site tend to be determined by the researcher, and its demarcations are often not clear even to the people he or she studies” (Kendzior, 2013).

Digital technologies and mobility have transformed the historically situated geographic affiliation of cultural practices. However, “place” and values associated and transmitted through particular places continue to be salient. In some cases, as I argue in this dissertation, people’s use of digital technologies may reinforce place-based identities, although these practices may be physically distanced from the geographies that influence them. Indeed, digital technologies have amplified “imagined communities” and shared identity practices formed and intensified on and through print-based media, including nationhood and religion (Anderson, 1983). Culture is shared, practised and reproduced through multi-media nodes of influence including both digital and print-based media. Digital technologies have a strong influence on cultural transmission especially with the multi-medium nature of technological platforms, including blogs and social media which provide a platform for written, visual and audio content.

This raises new questions about the ways in which culture and language are created and reproduced through technology. Anthropology and ethnographic research have an important role to play in the context of digital, and thereby social and cultural, transformations. Thus, I have aimed to “turn away from the common-sense idea that such things as locality and community are simply given or natural and turn toward a focus on social and political processes of place making, conceived less as a matter of ‘ideas’ than of embodied practices that shape identities” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997b:4). As such, this dissertation presents a deep, yet flexible and nuanced understanding of mobility and social interconnections, acknowledging that belonging is experienced within a world that is permanently on the move (Nyamnjoh, 2013a).

Digital ethnography has a temporality which mirrors social trends in the use of technology. Popular uptake and use of digital technologies increased quite a lot during the course of my fieldwork, particularly driven by the popularity of smartphones. When I first started my research, I was contacting participants by SMS, phone call or Blackberry Messenger (a popular messaging service for Blackberry smartphones, whose users predominantly migrated to WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger). During the course of the research it became more common to find reliable Wi-Fi access points in public areas and restaurants, thus allowing people to connect more frequently and whilst on the move. Throughout the course of my research I started using new technologies and platforms myself, including an iPhone, Google Maps, Voice Memos, WhatsApp and Twitter, all of which became important tools which expanded my access to the field of study, and mediated my own personal interactions with and understanding of mobility and belonging. The nature of digital communications – and the interesting thing to reflect on in the case of conducting digital ethnography – is such that, as much as we are engaging with others, we are also in our own minds and spaces digitally. Meaning making is, therefore, informed not only by direct language and communication, but also our own habitus and socialisation within digital spaces, which shape interpretation and understanding.

I also reflected on how new developments in public understanding of online privacy and data drastically influenced my topic of study. Revelations by Edward Snowden about government spying on citizens online, as well as media revelations about the harvesting of personal online data by Cambridge Analytica to inform online political advertising, both occurred during the period of my PhD studies. These revelations led me to reflect on how accessing and using technological devices and mediums has an immediate “permanence”, breaking down public and private spheres, and providing new avenues for government surveillance, and risks to freedom of expression. In popular media, stories about digital technologies are no longer only framed in the context of technology as a vehicle of freedom and democracy (as reported during the Arab Spring, December 2010–2011), and with the increasing popularity of consumer-friendly app-based technologies) – but now as a tool for social control, with privacy and personal autonomy eroding, and big data, artificial intelligence and robots “taking over”.

At the same time, although such debates are profoundly “modern”, “innovative” and situated within the contemporary communications landscape, communications intermediaries have taken many different shapes and forms in history. Walter Nkwi describes the role of letter writers and call box attendants as key communication technology mediators in different historical times in Cameroon. Letter writers of the 1940s and 1950s and call box attendees of the 2000s straddled public and private spaces of communication. They were “held dearly as

a hegemonic force in the shaping and re-shaping of colonial societies ... Letter writers had the power to phrase and re-phrase letters: frame and re-frame words according to the way they could best mediate between African and European literacies” (Nkwi, 2016:188). The study of digital technologies demonstrates how the flows of information, ideas, goods and services and capital are situated in a particular political and economic history which, in turn, is ideologically embodied – to some extent – by those who adopt, use and transform technologies through their networked practices. In my analysis of digital technologies, this research has aimed to capture the current issues of the times and present both the positives and the negatives.

When studying the “nimble-footedness of culture” (Alhaji, 2014) in a mobile, transnational and digitally mediated world, a certain temporality also appears in relation to the pace at which academic discourses can practically keep up with the speed of information and actions on and through the internet. This is particularly challenging in the context of the quick changing nature of political decision making, and the influence of digital media on public debate. Oftentimes, if I was searching for a relevant academic take on contemporary issues I would turn to social media and popular blog sites for commentary by academic and subject matter experts. I would look at the blogs, Twitter feeds and views of Somalis who had been influenced by, for example, the US travel ban on travellers from selected countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Maltz, 2018), or the hashtag #MeToo (Manikonda et al, 2018). The quick and immediate pace of dissemination associated with digital technology has both created and necessitated the immediacy of communication, analysis and publication.

This is a trend that traditional academic publishing has not kept up with, but in which public intellectuals and people themselves – as citizen journalists – have filled a void. Thus, many of my citations include references from public and open commentary and media sites instead of closed access academic journals, though I have thoroughly reviewed relevant academic literature. Often when there was something reported in the news (like Trump’s travel ban in January 2017 which impacted upon Somali mobility in the Western hemisphere, or the #MeToo movement, an global online campaign against sexual harassment), I would seek out academic perspectives, but often had to go to Twitter and search hashtags, and become a participant observer of digital platforms, communications and organising online in order to get real-time insights and observe debates and discussions. Such is the power of digital ethnography, as one has the ability to follow and directly engage with people, influencers, politicians, social movements, etc. I was also able to connect via email and interview several Somali academics and ICT industry stakeholders working in Somalia. Digital ethnography allowed me to observe different types of perspectives, from the individual, to the organisational

and institutional, and across borders transnationally in ways that I would have otherwise been unable to fathom conducting traditional academic research.

Digital methods are also situated in a context where conducting research in urban environments poses many challenges, including, to cite Bennett and Pereira (2013), “The realities of transport ... the arduousness of work and family arrangements ... the frustrations of resources, the implacability of life’s capacity to surprise, befuddle, infuriate, all bedevil the hope of clean methodological journeys ... It is not that research cannot be undertaken in conditions of relative chaos, gross economic disparities, displacement, uncertainty and surprise – it is more that methodologically focused writing and thinking on these conditions as *the norm* is rare” (Bennett & Pereira, 2013:12). Digital ethnography offers a means of navigating space and place and to reach people in a time and place that is convenient and safe to them without unnecessarily interrupting their daily lives. This may run against the grain of conventional ethnography, which tends to be about “being there”. However, I see digital ethnography as being part of a critical conversation on anthropology’s engagement with the “field” and study of “culture” in a world that is both mobile and inevitably influenced by digital information and communications.

## **Narrative Techniques**

Ethnography is a method of studying and narrating the everyday. It softens the empiricist nature of social science studies in which participants are often represented as research subjects rather than as characters with personalities, feelings and personal and diverse social beliefs (Nyamnjoh & Brudvig, 2013:8). It also provides a means through which to understand personal and individual social beliefs and actions outside of what is typically associated with particular groups, and assumptions that are often made based on group trends. Thus, narrative ethnography is, in some ways, a study of outliers and a questioning of the parameters of inclusion. Ethnographic research and participant observation, in particular, required me to treat many seemingly incidental observations as important to the micro-politics of space and place (Block, 2009:9). Participant observation also evoked the possibility to explore the counter narrative. In some cases, direct observations debunked myths and assumptions and contrasted with verbal narrative. Prolonged participant observation of people’s movement, encounters and reactions, interactions and language (including body language) was a valuable technique to understand arising emotions, sociability, mobility and belonging.

It is through use of narrative techniques that the experiences of being and belonging in the everyday become compassionately studied through vivid and personal account. When starting

out on this ethnographic study, I was particularly drawn to seek to understand identity and belonging in terms of what Marshall Sahlins terms, “mutuality of being” and “inter-subjective belonging” (Sahlins, 2013:2). I have aimed to recount the “realities of practice over the essentialisms of structure” to reveal the “messy contents of daily life” in the creation and reproduction of social practices of kinship (Sahlins, 2013:9). Narrative techniques such as ethnography assist us to understand “actual” versus “proper” or “hoped for” discourses of belonging, as they involve engaging with research participants in their daily lives through observation and participation. This takes priority over relying on secondary accounts which impart the bias of the researcher or narrator, over and above my own interpretation as an ethnographer.

As I observed of the narrative approach used by Jonny Steinberg in *A Man of Good Hope* – detailing the experiences of one Somali man in South Africa – narrative techniques demonstrate that we cannot truly understand other’s lives without becoming deeply involved and intermingled in the dynamics of their stories ourselves (Brudvig, 2015). Indeed, “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 2000:110) and forming mutual relationships built off of trust were primary research “techniques”. While I did have a series of interview questions that I asked selected research participants, it was by hanging out without a formal agenda that allowed me to experience a greater sense of understanding through conviviality. It was through the moments “in-between” that I got a better sense of understanding through interpretative analysis. My experience was similar to that of Nereida Ripero-Muñiz (2015) who describes how, during her fieldwork with Somali women in Nairobi and Johannesburg, she realised that, “Some women’s life-stories were not being expressed the way I expected, as many of the women were not sure what kind of self-narrative they were expected to produce, but at the same time more meaningful data was emerging in the casual conversations I had with women after or before the interviews” (Ripero-Muñiz, 2015:25). There is a sort of performativity associated with conducting and participating in formal interviews. The interview as a process of engagement itself may also evoke past memories and experiences of participating in interviews as part of the migration process – for example, being interviewed as part of the asylum-seeking and refugee administration application. Thus, there is a distance that is evoked, as many people will simply recite the anecdotes they think the researcher expects of them. On the other hand, the boundaries of participation and observation often become blurred when the researcher becomes involved in the micro-politics of everyday life as an active agent in the community, influencing both how information is presented, and processes of meaning making.

Important considerations in using narrative techniques included the methods of storytelling, the process of self-reflection and the meaning that is ascribed to words and emotions through



storytelling and thick description. It is important to note that participant observation as a research technique involves a high level of attentiveness, requiring the researcher to strive to set aside ideas about how things “should” be in order to find out how they actually are (or aren’t) (Ross, 2010:10). Narratives inherently contain people’s perceptions and, often, their own interpretations of meaning derived from lived realities. They also contain the interpretation of the receiver, whose own understanding of the narrative may be influenced by his or her particular social world; a situation further complicated by field realities of translation from or into the language of the researcher or the interlocutor. Interviewing, transcription, coding and analysis rely on very different factors of interpretation. As James Scheurich writes, “Interviewing as a research method can be artificially separated into two parts. The first part is actually doing the interview; the second is interpreting the interview” (Scheurich, 1997:61). It is because of these layers of interpretation and recount that narratives are a valuable technique in attempting to understand social worlds, life histories and current experiences of being. Through these stages, I was able to develop a closer understanding about myself as an ethnographer, including my interpretation of narratives and worlds.

Narrative techniques are also an exciting and new territory when we reflect on how digital narration throws into chaos the traditional ordering and rules of academic practice. For example, new ways of gathering data in digital spaces challenges conventional expertise, referencing and knowledge production in scholarly work. Traditional means of conducting research involve face-to-face interactions, which stemmed from a time when there may have been limited information available on the topic of study, other than that which interlocutors could provide directly. However, when those being “researched” are continually present on online mediums through self-representation and group representation (such as through video journalists and bloggers), online spaces become critical to narrative practices. This also calls into question whether traditional face-to-face narrative practices can any longer be a sole means of narrative analysis without the complementary analysis of digital narrative practices. Actually, research participants are located in multiple and simultaneous places and conversations that take place online and may even occur outside of the rigidities and formalities of spoken language – they may include emojis, memes, social media threads, voice notes and online alias identities.

My use of narrative techniques relied on a conviviality of both digital and analogue spaces and practices. I agree with the point made by Tom Boellerstoff that, interviews – as a formative narrative technique – are elicitation methods, allowing people to speak directly about themselves, their ideas, and practices and beliefs but, he writes:

“The problem with elicitation methods in isolation is that this methodological choice surreptitiously encodes a theoretical presumption that culture is present to consciousness. It is predicated on the belief that culture is something in people's heads: a set of viewpoints that an interviewee can tell the researcher, to appear later as an authoritative block quotation in the published account. Of course, persons can often be eloquent interpreters of their cultures; as a result, interviews should be part of any ethnographic project. But what interviews and other elicitation methods can never reveal are the things we cannot articulate, even to ourselves” (Boellerstoff cited in Horst & Miller 2012:29).

Therefore, as important as interviews are, narrative techniques must be paired with participant observation, as both methods deliver different and complementary modes of understanding. Furthermore, if, as anthropologists, we go to places where people live and socialise, we cannot distance ourselves from the digital spaces that people frequent on a regular basis.

### **Subjectivity and Embodiment in Ethnographic Practice: Situating Feminist Fieldwork**

In this section I reflect upon reflexivity, subjectivity and embodiment in ethnographic practice. I describe how one's own social location influences research experiences, data and knowledge production and possibilities thereof. Ethnography is a process of self-reflection. As Michel de Certeau (1984) argues, a reading of social space has much to do with one's own position in it. While carrying out research I remained continuously aware of my own social role in the community, and particularly my gendered role, to consider with whom I associated and interacted and the methods that I used. I would continually reflect on my own presence in my fieldwork and the impact of my social role on others, ensuring that my interactions were appropriate, nuanced and non-interventionist.

For example, one day while visiting the roadside, open-air shop of Hassan – a young Somali man who relocated on his own to Cape Town, and whose online profile presents him with his face painted with the Somali flag, his light blue suit to match – he cordially invited me to sit behind the cash till and hang out. I felt most welcomed, but a bit out of place, and hoped that I was not intruding or becoming a topic of gossip. I realised that my own perception of the situation was based on my own internalised beliefs about being there, as a woman hanging out in this young Somali man's shop, despite the fact that people approached me as if I belonged there. I was offered to sit on the single seat in the shop; customers asked me the price of airtime and sweets; the shopkeepers would manoeuvre around me to hand out single cigarettes and small change to customers.

This experience reminded me of Judith Okely's point that, "As participant observation is integral to social anthropological fieldwork, and participation entails physical engagement, this means that the anthropologist needs to unlearn or at least be able to recognise the bodily knowledge from his/her lived past that informs interpretations in the field" (Okely, 2007: 65). Furthermore, I am drawn to and find myself deeply aligned with Okely's perspective that research is "a process of physical labour, bodily interaction and sensory learning which constitutes a foundation for the production of written texts." I reflected on her point that, "Knowing others through the instrument of the field worker's own body involves deconstructing the body as a cultural, biographical construction through a lived and interactive encounter with others' cultural construction and bodily experience" (Okely, 2007:77). I considered how I may have been perceived and realised that gendered expectations and ideas about what constitutes a "good woman" may be generated in contexts very different from my own.

Research, including ethnography, should be a process of self-reflection that runs parallel to the workings of instruments of power. In addition to research, writing is inherently a process of projection on multiple levels – projection of the self, of shared values, of epistemological standpoints, etc. That said, this dissertation does not necessarily reflect the views of all the people with whom I've interacted, interviewed or observed. Rather, it reflects my understanding and experience of the mobility and digitally mediated lives of Somali migrants in South Africa as a result of personal interactions, conversations and information gathered.

In some cases individuals were hesitant to engage in research-related activities and interviews. This dilemma evokes James Scheurich's postmodern critique of research interviewing. This perspective suggests that, "The researcher has multiple intentions and desires, some of which are consciously known and some of which are not. The same is true of the interviewee" (Scheurich, 1997:62). I was mindful that the very process of research and the structure of an interview are based on a hierarchical relationship. In agreeing to participate in the research process, the interviewee consents to a certain degree of vulnerability by accepting the researcher into his or her life and relating his or her personal experiences, reflections and emotions as data (Oakley, 1981). Although this should, and certainly can be, a process based on mutuality, I continue to be wary about how it can also lead to personal views being exploited as information is taken out of context into the academic world.

In designing research, there is always a danger that data will be misused or misinterpreted. Furthermore, in engaging in interviews or fluid conversation it is typical that the researcher may – intentionally or unintentionally – probe for information based on his or her own

assumptions or what the researcher expects to hear. The information extracted may or may not be directly relevant. This type of “data extraction” may also manifest in the context of researchers gathering information and taking it to an academic context without feedback loops to engage participants to be able to continue to speak for and represent themselves.

As Margary Wolf writes, “Some postmodern critics question the very possibility of ethnographers representing the experience of another culture and others question the ethics of even attempting to do so, seeing the process itself as an exercise in colonialism (domination)” (Wolf, 1992:5). It is important that research is reciprocal and responsible, and indeed, the more so it is, the more likely one is to understand and accurately make meaning of field experiences. In trying to research through reciprocity and ethics, the researcher should share his or her own stories, knowledge and views in a dialogue with research participants towards building an inter-subjective understanding. This dialogue can be sustained by finding areas of mutual interest outside of the direct research topic and questions. For example, I was able to do this by connecting with a woman named Ayan who was also interested in women’s leadership and agency. We could share resources, opportunities and personal experiences; and we exchanged stories about our personal relationships, and family expectations and futures. Similarly, I connected with another Somali woman named Sahra who was interested in studying at university where I could offer insights and wrote a letter of recommendation for her scholarship application. It has been noted that, “It becomes clear that, in most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest her own personal identity in the relationship” (Oakley, 1981:41). This involves the transitioning process from “being” a researcher, to “becoming”, as was the case in my experience, a teacher, a friend and, even, a mentor and mentee. This also necessitates a certain degree of self-vulnerability through the researcher’s openness and willingness to explore.

As Ruth Behar writes,

“As a mode of knowing that depends on the particular relationship formed by a particular anthropologist with a particular set of people in a particular time and place, anthropology has always been vexed about the question of vulnerability” (Behar, 1996:5).

Relationships take time and trust, and any researcher who parachutes into a community, administers a questionnaire, or even an open-ended interview, and airlifts out will have a vastly

different story from that of a researcher who engages with communities in a multiplicity of ways, and by shedding his or her own skin to learn by experience. This involves a process of personal reflection and, inevitably, leads to challenging his or her own social and cultural framework. I agree with Alpa Shah's argument that participant observation is a "potentially revolutionary praxis" because it is a "form of production of knowledge through being and action; it is praxis, the process by which theory is dialectically produced and realized in action" (Shah, 2018:45).

Words themselves are culturally constituted, and while there is obviously meaning to be extracted from conversation, it is only through participant observation and direct engagement with social actions that extended meaning can be derived beyond that of verbal language. Ripero-Muñiz (2015) describes narratives as "performances of the self" which stand juxtaposed to "narratives told in interviews" which "become not only detached from a particular context but also detached from the self." This is why in some cases an interview may result in interviewees simply presenting the insights that the research would expect or has probed for based on their expectations – what the researcher "wants to see" or interviewees may present themselves however they prefer to be perceived by the researcher. Thus, "if the narratives of an interview are not performed the self is somehow lost" (Ripero-Muñiz, 2015:33). Throughout my experience trying to secure interviews, I came to realise the shortfalls in the interview process. I recognised the ways in which research is actually about the researcher's curiosity, spontaneity and willingness to be vulnerable, and to participate as fully and authentically as possible in multiple and intersecting roles.

Reciprocity should extend beyond the field and also become a core principle of writing ethnography. In my writing, I have aimed to establish participants and their views as authorities, rather than attempting to be an authority on other's lives, which I have no claim to do. In writing, I have attempted to weave in participants' anonymous anecdotes in ways that maintain their voices and perspectives on the topics of discussion. These anecdotes are not necessarily reflective of everyone's views, but provide personal anecdotal evidence which I selected to include in my writing, because I interpreted such anecdotes to have broader meaning and resonance. I recognise the ways in which anthropology, historically and inherently, is based on documentation of the "Other", and indeed, in many stages of this research I questioned whether I could ethically continue to make authorial claims about a community which I have little claim to understand beyond my interpretation of my research experiences.

I have attempted to wholly avoid “Othering” through my analytical focus (based on the topics I have chosen to focus on and those to leave out), through reflexivity and conscious assigning of authority to participants in responsible ways, while maintaining anonymity of all research participants. Despite this, I recognise the point made by Margary Wolf that, “Whether or not an anthropologist believes she creates, interprets, or describes culture, she must recognise that she creates “Others” as the result of her work, and that she must bear some responsibility for those Others” (Wolf, 1992:12). This responsibility is especially important in the context of how the research is used, if not immediately, then in the future, especially given a declining political climate and polarisation of views on human rights, immigrants and refugees. Research is a politics of data. It is further situated within the context of a particular politics of representation, and a politics of understanding.

I believe that it is nearly impossible to do full justice to my research questions, nor can I presume to be portraying others’ knowledge and experience through my word and world of knowledge. In this dissertation I wish to avoid politicising culture and identity. Yet, for much of the research process I was conflicted about the broader purpose of the research, wanting it to serve the community’s needs and become (even moderately) useful as a tool to gain voice and agency through broadening cross-cultural understanding. I put a lot of thought into navigating the contradictory nature of ethnography as non-interventionist, yet inevitably political. Words themselves are forms of meaning making, and despite my intentions, the political may be inevitable (Wright, 1998, Harrison, 2011). In order to address this, I aim to maintain myself as a neutral figure of authority in this dissertation by presenting direct quotations from interviews to support my claims. This ethnography is loyal to James Clifford’s concept of “partial truths”, in which a rigorous sense of partiality contributes to the writing of “true fiction” (Clifford, 1986:5). Ethical considerations have led me to question the extent to which ethnography is more about the subject or the writer, and who benefits from the anthropological endeavour.

I turned towards the literature on feminist anthropology as a way to understand and situate my own practical experiences and concerns about conducting research in ways that will not exploit others and that can even have a positive impact. As Margary Wolf writes,

“Feminist anthropologists are struggling with ways of transforming the objects of research into *subjects*, who themselves identify and design the research projects *they* think are needed, who retain control over the written outcome of the research, and who jointly publish with the anthropologists. Feminist anthropologists are aware of the

difficulties involved in such collaborative endeavours, perhaps more so than the postmodernists who so cheerfully encourage the idea” (Wolf, 1992:52).

In this line of thinking, I liaised with Somali community leaders around conducting collaborative research specific to the topic of ICT and digital technologies that may be useful for their programmes. However, this topic was not received with such high enthusiasm. While there was some interest in the subject, – and particularly on the comparative experiences of migrants in general, and not Somali specifically – perhaps there was not enough incentive or time to pursue the topic of research. However, the topic was seen as relevant in the context of migration, and I was able to interview several community leaders on their views.

It is important to recognise that marginalised communities in Cape Town are frequently approached by researchers and NGOs to participate in studies, a process which must feel like “data extractivism” for those who mediate the research exchanges and communication with the community for their participation. To me, it is a process that is understandably met with some level of scepticism and requires analysis of the mutual benefit, no matter how good of a relationship one might have with a community. I understand that while there may have been an interest to engage in a collective research project, community leaders must also be selective about where and how to engage, even if simply for dedicating time, resources and managing communications. It is understandable that much of the focus of migrant community leaders and their work is on projects that would support community access to legal services and documentation, and education around English language, health and human rights topics.

During the course of my research I was able to refer a Somali community-based organisation to a source of funding, which supported the organisation to continue and expand its community programming in its areas of work, listed above. I considered conducting research directly related to these initiatives and getting further involved. However, I came to understand the value of maintaining certain objectivity and distance which is characteristic of anthropological and ethnographic research. I felt that I had already involved myself for two years in community-based initiatives as a researcher and as a volunteer English teacher. I reflected on how this greatly furthered my research understanding and opened up the opportunity to build networks and make connections, but it also took my time and focus away from the specific topic of study as my attention was directed to the tasks involved as a teacher – such as teaching grammar and grading homework – when I really needed to get started in writing my dissertation! I also reflected on how by attempting to help and collaborate with others, we also impose certain values which may or may not be shared. It could be that the Somali community did not want to be singled out for research on their use of digital technologies, especially since the topic is

not singly relevant to this social group, but indeed, to anyone who is digitally connected, mobile or engaged in social life on and through the internet.

Anthropology is, in the words of Ruth Behar, “The desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something ...” (Behar, 1996:3). The work of feminist anthropologists including Ruth Behar, Margary Wolf and Judith Okely, resonated with me as I reflected on my research goals, what motivated me to study anthropology, and, at the same time, to understand the context of my own doubts that emerged about being an anthropologist and the gendered nature of anthropological endeavours. I wanted to be practically and civically engaged as a researcher, but felt highly conscientious about the responsibility and authority associated with this, particularly in the context of the history of anthropology and it being a mechanism of imposing Western or outside values and claims on groups.

Methodological and analytical outcomes of my research also incite the ethical dilemma presented by Gupta and Ferguson who write, “How can ‘we’ anthropologists presume to speak for ‘them’ our informants? Is not ‘our’ knowledge of ‘them’ inevitably shaped by colonial and neo-colonial power relations that render the whole enterprise suspect? How can ‘our’ anthropological mission of understanding ‘others’ proceed without falling into the familiar traps of exoticisation, primitivism and orientalism?” (Gupta & Ferguson, 2001:24). Anthropologists participate in the “politics of representation” through research on communities and individuals. Therefore, my ethical considerations involved taking ethnographic methods as a form of political practice. Ethically, this involved maintaining a “predicament-oriented approach” (Nyamnjoh, 2007b). Reflexivity in the field remained critical to “recognising a variety of different ways in which anthropological representations may be engaged with questions of culture and power, place making and people making, resistance and subjectivity (Gupta & Ferguson, 2001:24-5), and to understanding that “knowledge of people grants power over people” (Nyamnjoh, 2007b:6).

### **Feminist Fieldwork in Practice: Ethics, Challenges and Ways Forward**

*Women, Culture and Society* (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974) greatly influenced feminism in anthropology. The book introduced to anthropology the need to focus on women’s lived experiences and perspectives around the world, and to theorise gender power relations without assuming that women’s experiences are universal. Historically, ethnographic research



had been primarily carried out by male anthropologists and from a male perspective. Beyond the need for women's perspectives both as fieldworkers and as research participants, there is a need to design gender-focused research from a feminist perspective. The key difference between gender analysis and feminist research is that, "Feminist research is about a larger politics of change than a project with a gender lens or one that incorporates gender analysis. It is about understanding and examining structures and layers of power and how they work" (Association for Progressive Communications, 2018:16). Within this framework, feminist ethnography is rooted in the call for anthropology to become more publicly engaged and to apply a critical lens to the question of women's agency and the operating of power through structures and mechanisms of control that are both gendered and maintain gender norms and status quos.

In 2015 students of the University of Cape Town erupted in the #RhodesMustFall Movement that spread to other universities throughout South Africa. Central to this movement was the call for decolonisation and transformation of higher education. A key component of the clamour by students was an intersectional approach to decolonisation factoring in categories such as race, culture, class, gender and sexuality, among others (Bosch, 2017; Ndelu et al, 2017; Nyamnjoh, 2016; Ramaru, 2017). Naturally, as a modest contribution on my part, I decided to take gender seriously in my study of Somali migrants in Cape Town. In their book *Feminist Activist Ethnography*, Craven and Davis (2013) define feminist ethnography as, "A project committed to documenting lived experience as it is impacted by gender, race, class, sexuality, and other aspects of participants' lives" (Craven & Davis, 2013:1). Further, "among the many strands of feminism, there is support for linking feminist ethnography to a commitment to engaging in research that is socially and politically relevant to those we study" (Craven & Davis, 2013, 9). Bennett and Pereira (2013) note that, "Feminist work has always been particularly concerned with the relationship between research and activism. Although many would struggle to be completely clear about when they were definitely engaged in the one activity and when the other, the legacies and contemporarily realities of privilege (of class, of race, of ethnicity, for example) continue to live out across definitions of roles, identities and the value of feminist work" (Bennett & Pereira, 2013:8). There are practical and ethical challenges that emerge in carrying out feminist ethnography, which Schrock (2008) highlights as three main challenges. She writes,

"First, we must struggle with the critiques within feminism about the possibilities and problems inherent in representing 'other' women and working across difference; secondly, feminist ethnographers must account for feminisms' commitment to social change, while grappling with ethnography's tradition of studying cultures with the goal

of non-interference; and thirdly, feminist ethnographers must grapple with poststructuralist critiques of knowledge production, which criticise the idea that cultures can be 'known' or fully understood" (Schrock, 2008:12).

As Schrock writes in her later historiography of feminist ethnography (2013), multiple questions arise around the ethics of representation in the context of feminist ethnography. These pose ethical dilemmas for fieldworkers, which may not be unique to feminist ethnography, but relevant to ethnography at large. For example, is it ethically viable for outsiders to represent groups to which they do not belong? Debates led by Judith Stacy and Lila Abu-Lughod on "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" raised questions about the ethics of feminist engagement in the field, as the idolised image of an egalitarian and reciprocal relationship between researcher and participants may not be realistic, especially in the long term. Furthermore, assuming that a sisterly reciprocity would be possible may be equally ignorant, negating the power differentials that exist between the researcher and the researched (Shrock, 2013).

Many ethical dilemmas arise for feminist fieldworkers, and they have faced criticism in several ways which resonate with my own experiences and reflections. For example, in the fieldwork process, I tried to conduct research in a reciprocal way, characterised by friendship; whereas in writing I became dubious and anxious about the power inherent in representing "Others" in a written and academic context which is itself exclusive and non-egalitarian. As mentioned, I wanted to pursue research that would have some practical and political value to those that I was interested in researching.

As a feminist anthropologist, I feel a deep commitment to working for women's wellbeing and unearthing insights that can contribute to the betterment and agency of women in society, however that may be personally defined. In my conversations with one woman in particular – with whom I shared mutual interests in women's rights and empowerment – several struggles experienced by Somali women were revealed to me, as well as proposed strategies of how to address these problems. I agreed that it would be important to address the controversial issues raised, which were affecting the lives of women and leading to stigma and acts of violence.

I was asked to assume a leadership role in a community-based initiative that was in the process of being registered as an organisation to raise awareness and address some of the issues of concern. While I wanted to support my friends in this noble endeavour, and provide whatever skills I could offer to guide them towards their objectives, I knew that a leadership

role would mean interfering, which I was not comfortable with doing as a researcher. I was hesitant to assert myself as an active player, as much as I continued to support my friends in such worthy ambitions, however possible from an external position. This speaks to what Schrock (2013) describes as “the potential determinants of representation” and the shared challenge faced by feminist ethnographers that we “must account for feminisms' commitment to social change while grappling with post-structuralist critiques of knowledge production”.

Schrock describes the heavily criticised case of an article co-published by an Australian feminist anthropologist and an Aboriginal woman from the community of study, which revealed high incidences of rape in the community. As Schrock (2013) describes, many argued that the anthropologist misused her power to publicly discuss rape within the Aboriginal community, and some argued that the co-author was used to gain legitimacy. This article and its controversy opened discussions among feminists about the inherent problems with trying to represent "Other" women. Scheper-Hughes has argued (1995) that anthropologists have a moral responsibility to be public intellectuals. She writes that,

“Cultural relativism, read as moral relativism, is no longer appropriate to the world in which we live and that anthropology, if it is to be worth anything at all, must be ethically grounded: If we cannot begin to think about social institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms, then anthropology strikes me as quite weak and useless” (Scheper-Hughes, 1995:410).

Further, “What makes anthropology and anthropologists exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and even a political) stand on the working out of historical events as we are privileged to witness them?” (Scheper-Hughes, 1995:411) As Diane Lewis writes in her piece on Anthropology and Colonialism (1973),

“The process of objectively studying others involves the treatment of those studied as things, as objects towards which there can be no (scientifically) justified sense of involvement. Since objectification of the other requires alienation from him, it requires the observer to separate his inner self from the outer world of the observed. This creation of two spheres ... permits the qualitative distinction between oneself and the other” (Lewis, 1973:585).

On the other hand, the “anthropologist as activist” stance risks “evangelising public anthropology” as nothing more than “soul saving”. This may simply gratify anthropologists who are “wedded to redeeming ‘powerless people’” (Nyamnjoh, 2015a:48), leading to the

unequivocal determination of “subjects” and uncontested power by anthropologists. As Francis Nyamnjoh (2015a) has argued,

“Without a rigorous commitment to science, and with little patience for knowledge production as a collaborative endeavour, anthropology today, it seems to me, is preponderantly evangelical in its approach – ‘fighting back’, saving situations, saving souls, winning converts and ‘giving back’ to poor villagers and migrant labourers” (Nyamnjoh, 2015a:48).

Furthermore, public anthropology that may appear “emancipatory in the immediate and short term could, in the long term, and often at a closer look, actually serve to compound domination and oppression” (Nyamnjoh, 2015a:58). Colonial anthropology has survived through development institutions, who employ anthropologists as development practitioners seeking to address “culture”, but “rarely study social change in a holistic and historicised manner” (Nyamnjoh, 2015a:59). In conclusion, drawing on Kulick (2006), any attempt “to theorise anthropology’s alignment with powerlessness must take into account its origins in and its continued alignment with power” (Kulick, 2006:934), including. “the long-standing anthropological interest in powerless or disenfranchised people” (ibid).

As the next section will argue, anthropology should further theorise if and how digital technologies, spaces and mediums may contribute to a greater conviviality between anthropological knowledge production and public interest based on tools and techniques for self-representation. Questions about voice, power and representation through the internet are important to debates on public anthropology, knowledge production and cross-cultural understanding in a digitising world.

### **Digital Anthropology and Studying Technology, Culture and Society**

This section discusses how to conceptualise and negotiate anthropological methodologies in the era of digitisation, given the novelty and evolving nature of digital anthropology. In this section I review some of the key anthropological literature that has shaped thinking and practices in the field of digital anthropology, while recognising the critical interdisciplinarity of the sub-field in its future trajectory. Indeed, in *Return to Cyberia* (2006) Horst and Panagakos emphasise the interdisciplinarity of literature on digital technologies and society as drawn from communications, linguistics, anthropology and sociology among other fields, including science and technology studies. The interdisciplinary study of digital technologies is important in the context of the broad impacts and consequences of the digitisation of the economy,

governance and social life. It is also important in the context of broadening academia's questioning of how physical and legal digital infrastructures come to mediate social outcomes. For example, looking at how digital mobility intersects with citizenship laws, access to geographic spaces, culture, media, journalism, citizen participation, social identity formation, etc. would be incomplete without incorporating insights from science and technology scholars or looking at physical digital infrastructure, regulatory mechanisms and sub-cultural histories of the web. After introducing the new fields of digital anthropology and ethnography, this section poses questions about if and how digital anthropology may contribute to a greater conviviality and ethics of engagement through its possibilities for self-representation and new forms of publicness.

### *The New Fields of Digital Anthropology and Ethnography*

In her article, "Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media" (2010), Gabriella Coleman highlights that while contributions by anthropologists such as Escobar (1994) and Appadurai (1996) have influenced methodological and theoretical discourses on digital technologies and society, relatively few anthropologists in the 1990s approached "the digital" from an ethnographic perspective. However, a growing body of ethnographic literature on digital technologies has emerged since the early 2000s in the wake of profound economic, political and social changes and cultural mobilities spread by globalisation. Looked at collectively, this literature has sparked the development of the field of "digital anthropology", which "explores how human and digital can be defined in relation to one another" (Horst & Miller, 2012). Digital anthropology includes the discovery and conceptualisation of new methodological approaches and engaging in digital spaces through "digital ethnography" (ibid). It also strives to position engaging analytically with the "network society" (Castells, 1996), challenging the notion of cultural spaces and places and geographically contained field sites (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997a). Digital ethnography presents new opportunities as well as exciting methodological challenges which I outline in the next chapter on methodology.

### *Cultural Reinvention, Digital Geeks and Prosaic Public Discourse*

Coleman divides the "ethnographic corpus" on digital media into three broad but overlapping categories including: the cultural politics of digital media, the vernacular cultures of digital media and the prosaics of digital media. Studies that investigate the cultural politics of digital media focus on how cultural identities "are remade, subverted, communicated, and circulated through individual and collective engagement with digital technologies" (Coleman, 2010:488). An example of this might include John Postill's (2006) work on the role of digital and social

media in social movements and political engagements in Malaysia, and Jenna Burrell's (2012) study on youth and the internet in Ghana. Vernacular cultures of digital media include groups such as hackers, geeks, systems administrators, programmers and the open source software movement whose "logic is organised significantly around ... selected properties of digital media" (ibid). This might include Coleman's (2012) study of hacker communities and the free and open software movement. The prosaics of digital media examines "how digital media feed into, reflect, and shape other kinds of social practices, like economic exchange, financial markets, and religious worship" (ibid). Deborah Wheeler's (2005) work on the intersection of the internet with youth, gender and social movements in the Middle East is an example of the "prosaics of digital media". Wheeler's book *The Internet in the Middle East*, analyses the diverse ways in which the internet affects public discourse and social practice in Islamic society (Wheeler, 2005).

### *Six Principles of Digital Anthropology*

Horst and Miller's co-edited book *Digital Anthropology* (2012), outlines six principles which the editors and their contributing authors suggest as foundations for the sub-discipline of digital anthropology. These principles are:

- 1) the digital intensifies understanding of nature of culture;
- 2) not only does the digital enable an understanding of analogue life, we are also "just as human within the digital world";
- 3) digital anthropology sits within the discipline's "commitment to holism";
- 4) cultural relativism is important and the assumptions that the digital is homogenising or universal need to be overcome;
- 5) the openness and closure in digital culture are ambiguous;
- 6) digital worlds are no more or less material than analogue worlds.

Expanding on the last point, Horst and Miller posit that, "The digital, as all material culture is becoming a constitutive part of what makes us human ... not only are we just as human within the digital world the digital also provides many new opportunities for anthropology to help us understand what it means to be human" (Horst & Miller, 2012:3–4). Indeed materialism is a central factor in digital anthropology (including the materiality of infrastructure, devices and digital content), yet the vast potentials and possibilities for appropriating ICTs are mediated through creative human agency. The digital is, therefore, a realm through which the creative agency of humans is illuminated as both independent from and in collaboration with ICT devices (Nyamnjoh & Brudvig, 2016). The point to be made is that use of the term "real" (as

opposed to the “digital”) should be used colloquially rather than analytically, to avoid fetishising analogue culture as “a site of retained authenticity” (Horst & Miller, 2012:13), and ICTs as technologically deterministic.

### *Identity is Permanently on the Move*

Digital anthropology provides a framework through which to understand the centrality of mobility and frontier-ness in human culture in a digitally mediated world. The online and the offline represent a synthesis, rather than a distinction, of worlds (Miller, 2011). The internet and social media are often trivialised and framed as less “real” than offline interactions. However, the sustained (and growing) use of social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp suggests that such an imagined distinction of the online and the offline fails to recognise the complex intersections and mobilities that constitute digitally mediated social life. The internet has come to play a crucial part in communication and social life and, therefore, should be central to our understanding of the social itself. As Nyamnjoh and Brudvig (2016) note, internet users come to embody Kopytoff’s notion of “frontier persons” (Kopytoff, 1987), as their lives are characterised by a sustained and digitally mediated mobility regardless of distances associated geographic or other social locations. The power of digital technologies and the internet to fundamentally change conceptualisations of social life calls into question rigid notions of identity and belonging based on dichotomy and distinction. In fact, digital technologies usher in the possibility for fluid identity (though this is not always the case in practice, as identities are often guarded in fear). Internet users straddle both online and offline worlds as they engage in the construction of identities and relationships, and in doing so, navigate between the two in order to realise a negotiated sense of being (Miller, 2011), and an identity that is “permanently on the move” (Nyamnjoh, 2013a).

## **Digital Ethnographies**

### *Adoptions and Use of Social Media Vary Considerably across Countries and Regions*

A nine-country comparative ethnographic study on “Why We Post” led by anthropologist, Daniel Miller, looks at the cultural particularities associated with social media activity in China, Brazil, Turkey, Chile, India, England, Italy and Trinidad. The projects highlights that, while many studies of the internet and social media make assumptions about the general similarities of internet experiences across different geographic groups, there are actually considerable variations in the adoptions and use of social media across countries and regions. The resulting publication, “Why We Post”, questions how on-screen life influences relationships, and the

consequences of social media everyday lives. The findings indicate that social media have become more than a communications platform. They have become a place of socialisation that intersects intricately with everyday life. The authors propose a “theory of scalable sociality” which suggests that social media has “colonised the space of group sociality between the private and the public”, (Miller et al, 2016:x). This allows for group accessibility and communication “with degrees of privacy” (Miller et al, 2016:9). The authors also draw on earlier work by Madianou and Miller (2012b) and their concept of “polymedia”, suggesting that use of a particular digital or social media platform is relative to use of others. There is an implicit understanding of which social media platforms are used for different purposes or social networks, which is a result of collective socialisation and contestation of social appropriateness of the individual platforms. This creates different social use and application of WhatsApp compared to email, for example. As a result, the particularities of any one platform should be understood in relation to other platforms and the digital architectural specificities which influence social space.

### *Ethnography and Knowing in a Digital World*

Ethnographic and narrative techniques are particularly important to research today, as there is a great risk that these methods are marginalised in a world where big data and data-driven models increasingly drive research agendas. As Tom Boellerstoff has noted, “In less than a decade big data has risen to a dominant position in many quarters of the technology sector, academia, and beyond. Massive amounts of grant money, private- and public-sector labour, and capital – corporate, state, and military – now flow into the generation, capture, and analysis of big data. The humanities and social sciences face threats and opportunities, not least because ‘ethnography’ is often presented as the Other to big data” (Boellerstoff, 2013).

Indeed, as digital connectivity, data and machine learning mediate culture, systems and life today, big data studies are increasingly prioritised as a means of understanding and solving society and societal problems by their alleged claim to remove bias and produce “fact”. However, the desire for objectivity leaves little room to understand and interact with social context, complexity and difference. To cite Boellerstoff again, “Big data is always already ‘big theory’ as well, acknowledged or not. How these informational regimes shape societies into the emerging future depends in no small measure on our ability to understand and respond to the making up of big data itself” (ibid). The flip side, and risk of ethnography in a world of big data, is that grand wholly or unverifiable anecdotal claims are presented as fact but with very little substantiation in them, despite postmodernist approaches and techniques applied to situate and substantiate claims through reflexivity and ethical foundations of engagement. As



Nyamnjoh notes, “Without a rigorous commitment to science, and with little patience for knowledge production as a collaborative endeavour, anthropology today, it seems to me, is preponderantly evangelical in its approach” (Nyamnjoh, 2015a:48–9). Furthermore, “A rediscovery and fulfilment of anthropology’s core mission and ambition as an evidence-based field science would yield more fruit” (Nyamnjoh, 2015a:59), necessitating a turn to bringing the quantitative and qualitative into conversation.

### *Cultural and Self Representation in a Digital Age*

The intersection of digital and feminist anthropologies presents important questions regarding the decolonisation of knowledge production both methodologically and analytically. In lieu of the many possibilities for public self-representation on and through digital technologies – and in light of the variety of means to engage across cultures, societies and traditional hierarchies online – can and should the anthropologist continue to represent others? Of course, anthropologists bring important theoretical tools, research ethics and conceptual perspectives. The anthropological perspective is unique from other social sciences, as it seeks to understand everyday life based on how micro-politics are influenced by and embedded in the broader political economy, mediated by structures and processes of power, and how culture is reproduced and enacted.

The key question is, if people can represent themselves through blogging, video, new media journalism and social media, as they do, is it the anthropologist’s role to facilitate that process? How can anthropology harness the unique power of digital spaces and multiple mediums, including visual, oral and written, to support the power of the digital for self-representation, and gather and tell stories in a way that privileges a “reliable and authoritative process of knowledge production” (Nyamnjoh, 2015a:50), while opening up academic’s traditionally closed publication models? Questions about academic knowledge production and truth seeking, self-representation through the internet, and making cultural knowledge accessible through open access and digitisation, are important, as anthropologists have unique knowledge that may be applied across sectors to facilitate cultural understanding in times of social upheaval and change.

As Sarah Kendzior experienced from her ethnographic research with Uzbek exiled political dissidents living all around the world, “Much as the internet levelled the playing field between the reporter and the reader (often reversing their roles in the process), the internet has transformed the relationship between the social scientist and the subject, with the former no longer the lone recipient of the latter’s concerns.” In this context, she asks,

“From where do anthropologists draw their authority and accountability? ... The internet makes ethnography something anyone can do, a threatening prospect for a conservative discipline struggling to locate its relevance ... Anthropology of the internet forces the question of whether being seen as an anthropologist is more important than doing meaningful ethnography. It strips the discipline of its elite trappings, requiring no excessive funding or dramatic upending of one’s life” (Kendzior, 2013).

Throughout this research I have continually reflected on and questioned: what are the historical conditions under which anthropology has existed conceptually and methodologically, and what is the future of anthropology in world of online communication, organisation and socialisation? These are questions that I will continue to consider in my future research endeavours, as important debates emerge in anthropology about open access, resources and representation in the discipline.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methodology used in this study, as well as reflexive experiences which influenced the resulting ethnography and positionality of the research. It described the application of reflexive and interpretative approaches, and shared arising ethical considerations that emerged in the research process. The chapter discussed how I identified research participants through both offline and online spaces. Participants were identified through a snowball sampling approach that started by identifying people through my established networks and relationships, as well as creating new ones. Studying culture in a mobile, transnational and digitally mediated world requires translating traditional ethnographic methods and practicalities of studying culture – such as narrative techniques and interpretative methods – into digital spaces.

To do justice to the theme of digital methodologies, the chapter has also discussed the crystallising literature in the field, pointing to how it has inserted itself and influenced research practices and conventional understandings of anthropology inquiry. As the world quickly becomes more and more digital, technologies become central to the study of culture, even if they are not the main focus of research topics. As anthropologist Daniel Miller says, “Anthropology was always a subject dedicated to the study of peoples around the world and whatever peoples around the world do. Therefore, we want to be studying it ... It’s a natural progression for anthropology – we follow what happens in the world. If the world goes digital, we go digital” (Miller, 2017). The term “digital” tends to be associated with new innovations,

like technologies and gadgets, and technological practices. However, digital technologies have significant effects and consequences on people, networks and cultures around the world. Anthropology is primarily concerned with human culture including the ways people socialise, communicate and live through networks – all of which will soon have digital elements (if they don't already), as the next 50% of the world connects to the internet and World Wide Web. If culture is enacted through social networks and maintained through relationships and engagements such as kinship and communications, one cannot study mobile and connected cultures without understanding the role of digital technologies and virtual spaces. Anthropology and ethnographic research have an important role to play in the context of digital and, thereby, social and cultural change. The discipline of anthropology leverages direct engagement and social relationships to understand multiplicities associated with digital transformations.

In this chapter, I have also argued for the need for anthropology and ethnographic studies to focus on women's lived experiences and perspectives around the world, and to theorise gender power relations without assuming that any women's experience is universal. Gender diversity in anthropology includes the need for women's perspectives both as fieldworkers and as research participants. It also includes designing and carrying out gender-focused research from a feminist perspective. This chapter described how feminist ethnography is rooted in the call for anthropology to become more publicly engaged and to engage in research that is socially and politically relevant to those we study. In doing feminist ethnography, there are also practical, ethical and epistemological challenges and opportunities, many of which I experienced while carrying out my research.

Challenges and internal struggles that arose in the research include: the ethics of representing others in research; practically and ethically mediating ethnography's tradition of objectivity and non-interference with the role of research and engagement in social change; and researching actively, while also understanding post-structuralism critiques of knowledge production. These challenges can be navigated through use of narrative and interpretative techniques, reflexivity and assigning authorial voice and power to participants through writing style and analytical approach. I have taken into consideration that the research presented in this dissertation does not necessarily reflect the views of all the people with whom I've interacted, interviewed or observed. Rather, it reflects my understanding and experience of the (im)mobility and digitally mediated lives of Somali migrants in Cape Town, South Africa, as a result of personal interactions, conversations and information gathered through ethnographic techniques.

In conclusion, the considerations presented in this chapter shaped the data-collection process in the sense that certain topics emerged as priority areas for analysis, and certain individuals were engaged over others – including Somali migrants who have lived in South Africa for several years, those who sit in community leadership roles and/or play a role in community outreach, have a university education and/or are business owners in South Africa, are conversant in the English language and use the internet. By interviewing multiple individuals who have wide (and different) knowledge, perspectives and involvement within the Somali community in Cape Town, the findings presented in Chapters Four and Five aim to highlight broad trends around the important influence and role of digital technologies on migration, (im)mobility and belonging, referencing the case and experiences of Somali migrants in Cape Town.

## Chapter 4: Political Economy of Somali Migration and Social Cohesion in South Africa

This chapter situates the political economy – including political and institutional issues – impacting Somali mobility and belonging in South Africa. The political, economic and legal landscape in South Africa mediates access to rights and opportunities, lived experiences and belonging for migrants, including Somali refugees in Cape Town. This chapter intends to present the “offline” legal and institutional frameworks and political context of immigration in South Africa, impacting upon Somali (im)mobilities and belonging in Cape Town, to position the role of information and communication technology in navigating mobility and belonging. It addresses the role of digital/social media in the political economy and how this impacts upon mobility discourse and social cohesion, as well as experiences of Somali and African migrants in navigating their positionality in South Africa. The chapter first situates the context of Somali migration in general, and asylum seeking in South Africa in particular. Conflict in Somalia over the past decades has led to mass migration of Somalis around the world, and the world’s most protracted refugee crisis. As highlighted by the UNHCR Special Envoy for Somali Refugees, Ambassador Mohamed Abdi Affey, Somalis have lived in exile for 27 years, and counting. As such, mobility, expansive diaspora networks and desires for future mobility (expressed in Somali as *buufis*) have been common features of life for Somalis in Cape Town.

Some Somalis in Cape Town moved to the city for work, studies or travel, and welcomed new experiences to integrate into public and professional life – such as Zeinab who enthusiastically moved to Cape Town from Mogadishu to pursue her postgraduate studies and plans to return to Somalia after graduating to continue her career in social development. Others, such as many Somali refugees, may have been forced to flee home, and arrived in Cape Town as asylum seekers. Somali migrants’ reasons for moving to South Africa vary, and immigrants include both voluntary and involuntary migrants and asylum seekers, refugees, permanent residents, students, job seekers and those who occupy both high level professional spaces and those who live in informal settlements. Fatima, a Kenyan-born Somali woman in her late twenties living in Bellville moved to South Africa to marry her Somali husband, whom she divorced several years later. Her husband was working in a shop in downtown Cape Town in a busy market square next to the city hall among several other Somali-owned market stalls and shops, where she would visit daily to “check on the guys”. She illuminated “who is a refugee” when she explained, “Somalis arrive on trucks, boats, walking. I arrived by plane to Joburg and then changed planes to Cape Town. They are asylum seekers; they don’t have passports and so must be given refugee documents in order to protect them.” For many in

Somalia, as in other countries in the African region such as Cameroon, mobility has “long been part of their social and economic organisation, as reflected in networks of trade and labour migration. Thus, for them, physical mobility is closely related to social mobility.” (Pelican, 2013:251). Indeed, mobility is “perceived as a precondition for individual and collective progress” (ibid). However, for many in Somalia, including those who have decided to return to Somalia or Somaliland voluntarily, “mobility is a matter of choice, as they enjoy the privilege of a future at home” (ibid).

Once in South Africa, many Somali migrants’ voice desires for future mobility. Such hopes for future mobility are heightened by a collective narrative and experiences of xenophobia and violence, and are further motivated by Somali transnational networks and relationships around the world. However, desires for future mobility are often met with geopolitical trends towards immobility. Many countries (such as the United States, as elaborated further in this chapter) have failed to uphold their commitments to refugee and migrant rights. The securitisation of migration, protection of national borders and neglect of refugee rights has taken precedence in migration policy in recent years in countries around the world. Somali experiences in South Africa are contextualised within a landscape of various layers of institutional immobility, which impact their mobility and belonging.

Firstly, this chapter describes the role of Bellville, Cape Town, as a key locality in the trajectory of Somali migration, in which conviviality, inclusion and belonging are cultivated through social capital and networks. While Bellville is associated as a “home away from home”, this notion of “home” is often created out of hopes and challenges associated with securing onward mobility outside of South Africa. After situating the Somali experience in Bellville, this chapter analyses international migration and refugee protection conventions and South Africa’s immigration policy – the limitations of which greatly influence the extent to which immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers are able to access legal rights and services, and indeed, navigate belonging. Crippling bureaucracies limit Somali migrants’ access to rights, future citizenship and experiences of belonging, as well as trajectories towards multicultural and conviviality in South Africa. This is precisely why Bellville emerges as a significant locality, as conviviality is navigated here through networks of social capital and shared experiences of (im)mobility. Limited political support for migrant rights in South Africa is not only a roadblock to Somali migrants’ legal belonging, but it also trickles through society to conjure up public distrust of migrants. In particular, a migration policy that is based on temporary status and delegitimisation hinders access to public life and perpetuates notions of “foreignness”. This manifests itself in acts of violence and discrimination which are collectively acknowledged as xenophobic – a term that is further unpacked in this chapter. Public statements by politicians

that portray migrants negatively, hate speech online that is directed against non-nationals and fake news circulating on social media conjure up fear and limit social cohesion in contemporary South Africa. Lastly, the chapter goes on to describe the role of community-based organisations and diaspora associations that facilitate bonding and bridging social capital in the context of public institutional and social exclusion. These groups play an important role in fostering access to rights and services for Somali migrants.

Social exclusion, as a result of actual or perceived prejudices in South Africa, may be a catalyst for transnational engagements in which digital technologies are a significant driver of heightened group consciousness and belonging. A combination of limited access to rights, and the reality of migrant families living transnationally across borders provides the grounds for understanding the significance of digital technologies, such as the internet, in the context of Somali (im)mobility and transnational belonging.

### **Somali Migration and Expansive Diaspora Networks**

Influenced by violent histories of geopolitics and state identity formation, Somalia may represent the culmination of the possibilities of bio-power, in which the sovereign state, or state factions, create mechanisms through which human lives become the objects of political strategy, and therefore of a general strategy of power. In the recent past, political unrest in Somalia, warring factions and insurgency destabilised the country and undermined possibilities for peace and prosperity. Somalia's lack of an internationally recognised state from 1991, when President Siad Barre's regime was overthrown, until 2012, when a new Constitution was enacted, critically demonstrates that state of turmoil and fragile reconstruction in Somalia. Indeed, the traditional concept of a "nation-state" has been broken down in Somalia, opening space for new forms of citizenship and belonging, in which the idea of a "homeland" remains central. As a result of histories of conflict and mobility, the Somali diaspora has emerged as a community of individuals outside of the nation-state who nevertheless consist of a distinct national "community" with shared social ideas and values, based on cultural hybridity and solidarity.

Expansive diaspora networks are the outcomes of a civil war in Somalia that has persisted for decades. Civil war in Somalia is fuelled by "centuries-old injustices; decades-old political feuds; Siyad's tyrannical state, and its indifference to the ordinary people's genuine grievances; the nature of post-colonial set-ups" (Farah, 2000:45). A lack of state presence in Somalia over past decades has destabilised much of the country and citizenry, leading to increased migration flows as a survival response. As highlighted by the UNHCR Special Envoy

for Somali Refugees, Ambassador Mohamed Abdi Affey, in a television interview in South Africa on 8 February, 2018, the Somali refugee situation is “the world’s most protracted situation ... with a single population in exile for 27 years and still counting ... it’s also the world’s most diverse in terms of the regions of the world where they have travelled to seek security and support” (SABC, 2018). The Somali refugee community is also one that has, in recent years, been somewhat “forgotten” as noted by the UNHCR Special Envoy. The focus of political attention, humanitarian aid and resources has been directed to other urgent humanitarian crises and immediate needs in Sudan, Syria, Burundi, Yemen and Myanmar.

A contemporary social history of mass global migration, *prima facie* refugee status and dispersed families and clan networks results from decades of internal conflict and political instability. Most Somalis become mobile in the quest for asylum, security and, critically, community in the face of displacement. While Somalis have become mobile and have dispersed globally for centuries, since the civil war, Somali communities have formed in almost every country (Horst, 2006c:1). Migration is not a new phenomenon for Somalis. Cape Town’s Somalis note that mobility has always been a way of life – based on historically nomadic lifestyles in which movement takes place within dense kin and clan networks (Huisman et al, 2011:26). The experience of mobility and immobility is expressed by use of the term *buufis*, which is used to express a longing to move (Jinnah, 2012a:1). Zaheera Jinnah explains that *buufis* means “a period of waiting, of living in limbo”. She provides the examples of Sara and Axmed, two Somali refugees in Johannesburg, for whom *buufis* is “construed to be an objective and ambition that helps them stay focused on their goal of resettlement”. However, *buufis* discursively implies a state of permanent uprooted-ness. Jinnah explains,

“By naming their resettlement goals and process as *buufis*, they are able to explain their lack of settlement and sense of isolation they have in Mayfair ... Yet, both Sara and Axmed fail to see how this ambition hampers their everyday life. By focusing exclusively on resettlement, they are unwilling or unable to invest in a life in Mayfair; consequently, they both are poorly connected to the wider Somali community, have severe financial insecurity and constantly complain of being in a state of stress” (Jinnah, 2016:116–117).

The desire for further migration associated with *buufis* often fails to deliver the expectations of better fortune, with huge risks taken to achieve this vision. For example, it was explained to me by Fatima that Somalis who wish to immigrate to the United States in order to connect with family and other Somalis there may first fly to Brazil and then travel by bus, foot or train or whichever means of transport comes willingly up towards Mexico, where they knowingly



subject themselves to up to six months in a US detention centre as a consequence of crossing the border, in the hopes of receiving asylum. Ripero-Muñiz (2015) observed this also when her Somali research assistant explained that she had paid \$2,500 to a middleman to organise her journey to San Paulo, where she met a group of Somalis and travelled to Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama and Mexico before crossing the United States border (Ripero-Muñiz, 2015:136).

Cell phones play a critical role in accessing information and organising migratory journeys and navigating borders. Asylum seekers, whose requests for asylum in the United States are denied, would sit in detention centres awaiting deportation, knowing they would be largely out of contact with loved ones. Ripero-Muñiz (2015) documents an SMS sent by her Somali research assistant while she was on her journey to the United States saying, “you know i wont be able to contact anyone inside the prison [detention centre] the will lock me six months or less sometimes wish me good luck and remember me in your prayers i will contact u as soon as i come out” (Ripero-Muñiz, 2015:134-5). In February 2018, the US Supreme Court ruled that, “Immigrants can be held by US immigration officials indefinitely without receiving bond hearings, even if they have permanent legal status or are seeking asylum” (Bowden, 2018), extending the “six-month rule” and leaving migrants in longer periods of limbo, often with limited access to rights.

### **Dashed Hopes, Disillusionment and Deportations**

In January 2017, US President Trump barred the citizens of seven majority Muslim nations including Somalia from entering the United States (Dahir, 2017a). Although the ban was challenged in the courts, and Iraq (as one of the seven countries) was removed from the list, the Supreme Court allowed it to take full effect in December 2017 (McCarthy & Laughland, 2017). In June 2018 the US Supreme Court made a final ruling to uphold the policy, which had already gone into effect while the hearings proceeded (BBC, 2018; Guardian News, 2018). This has had lasting effects on Somalis both in the US and those seeking resettlement there, including from South Africa and elsewhere on the African continent. For example, as Abdi explained to me, Somalis in South Africa who applied for resettlement in the United States for health reasons, to receive treatment for chronic illness such as kidney failure, were forced to abandon their long-standing applications and look elsewhere for treatment. In another instance, in January 2017, 20-year-old Adan Barre, a Somali man, finally received approval to leave Dadaab, the world's largest refugee camp in northern Kenya hosting many Somalis. He received this notice eight years after being selected for resettlement in the United States. Just two days earlier, Trump had signed his executive order on immigration, banning

Somalis from entering the United States – a decision which signed Adan's dreams of resettlement into the United States into history in the near future.

According to the UNHCR, in order to apply for resettlement, refugees must “go through a detailed vetting system involving eight federal agencies, six different security databases, five background checks, four biometric security checks, and two inter-agency security checks” (Dahir, 2017a). This demonstrates the level of interactions with the state that would have already taken place, and the bio-political regime in which states have total control over bodies and mobility. The travel ban has also negatively affected Somalis in the United States who have been left in limbo, uncertain if their families who have been identified to move to the United States as part of family reunification policies, will be able to actually relocate. “Not knowing when the wait will end has been hard on families in the area”, said a Somali woman living in Minnesota, a popular destination for Somali relocation that hosts a large Somali community. “Families here are panicking” (Arola, 2018). The travel ban has led to ‘chaos and detainings at multiple airports’ as well as ‘rampant uncertainty about when people who thought they were on the tail end of their resettlement processing will reunite with family already here.’ Many waiting for resettlement would grow ‘so restless they turned to dangerous crossings into Europe. Others who wait out the process in countries like South Africa ... face xenophobic attacks’.” (ibid).

In another situation, Maruf Sharif and his family had been living in the United States, after having been resettled in the mid-1990s. As a teenager, he got caught up with the wrong crowd and was convicted of a crime in 2002. Although at the time of the travel ban he was out of prison and working to rebuild his life including working in a stable job, he was summoned by immigration officers, detained and deported to Somalia – a country he had left when he was just eight years old. He had far more affiliation to and networks in the United States. By an unfortunate stroke of luck, Sharif and 91 other Somalis were deported on a plane that then returned to the United States due to logistical problems. This turn of events resulted in a lawsuit filed by some of the detainees, citing that “US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents forced them to stay seated, denied them access to a bathroom, and ‘kicked, struck, choked, and dragged’ them. This inhumane treatment lasted for 48 hours – 23 of which the plane sat on the runway” (Dahir, 2018), a situation which received media coverage from outlets including the *New York Times*, *Guardian* and Al Jazeera.

This incident drew public attention towards the plight of those caught in between Trump's immigration regime and its disregard for refugee and human rights. De Genova and Peutz have documented similar experiences of Somali refugees in their ethnography, *The*

*Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*, citing that, “The deportation of an individual may take only a few days, but the significance of this episode – replicating and engendering as it does histories of suffering and subjection – will continue to reverberate in the lives of the ‘deportees’ and their kin” (De Genova & Peutz, 2010:372).

In South Africa, immigration detention is “discretionary under South African law” based on the “presumption of illegality” (Amit, 2013:32). According to human rights groups, between 50 and 150 people are arrested each day when they attempt to renew their asylum and refugee permits (Ncube, 2017). Sutton (2016:183) has reported that hundreds of thousands of individuals are deported annually, although this number has dropped considerably since 2010 with the introduction of a special Dispensation for Zimbabwean Nationals (Africa Check, 2016), a policy which sought to regularise undocumented Zimbabweans currently residing in South Africa and to relieve pressures on the asylum system (PMG, 2011). The Lindela Detention Centre, located in the small town of Krugersdorp to the west of Johannesburg, is the only dedicated facility in the country where migrants facing deportation are sent (ibid). As Sutton, Vigneswaran and Wells (2011) highlight, the likelihood of being granted legal status, permitting one to remain in the country, is slim. Thus, migrants in Lindela Detention Centre remain in a space of waiting, which is “a highly subjective emotion linked to endurance, hope, impatience and, for refugees facing the considerable threat of being an illegal immigrant who can be thrown out of the country, outright anger, fear and dread” (Sutton et al, 2011:32). Many migrant detentions and deportations involve procedural irregularities (Amit, 2010), with detainees expressing frustration “at their prolonged and indefinite detention, which was generally accompanied by a lack of information about their legal situation” (ibid). Indeed, according to research by Lawyers for Human Rights, 94% of the detainees at Lindela were not told anything about their rights when it came to the deportation process and 75% of the detainees interviewed did not know they had the right to have their detention reviewed by a court (Lawyers for Human Rights, 2014). Perhaps for this reason, many migrants do “cling to the possibility of a release” (Sutton, 2016:191). According to Roni Amit, former senior researcher at the African Centre for Migration and Society, “Certainly there are a lot of people at Lindela, the detention centre for foreigners, who were arrested with valid documents and who were asked for bribes by the police and by immigration officials” (VOA, 2012).

Since South Africa’s immigration framework provides little opportunity for legal migration from other African countries, many economic migrants turn to the country’s asylum system. Demand on the system exceeds its functionality and inconsistencies in immigration policy have hindered the effectiveness of the refugee system in South Africa. As a result, the protective nature of the refugee system has been transformed into one of control – motivated

by the need to reduce the influx of economic migrants (Amit, 2011:458). As a result, many refugees and migrants in South Africa experience periods of perpetual legal liminality, characterised by waiting, endurance, fear and hope. In one case, Daniel, a man from Burundi whom I spoke to in a series of interactions in 2013, fled Burundi because an outbreak of violence over land reform. His father was killed and Daniel feared for his life. He escaped to Kenya but struggled in Nairobi, a vicious city for refugees and the urban poor alike, and instead found his way to Mombasa where he was advised he could find work at the shipping dock. He heard about the possibility of hiding in a cargo ship and escaping, and when the opportunity came to become a hideaway on a ship en-route to America, Daniel jumped at the chance for refuge. He hid with some others in the basement of the ship, but was then discovered by a crew member. The ship would stop in South Africa, and Daniel was advised to disembark the ship and apply for refugee status. Daniel disembarked the ship in early February 2012. He met several other migrants who gave him a bit of money for food and told him they could help to arrange accommodation for him. Upon arriving at the accommodation, Daniel was robbed at knife point and left with nothing but the clothes on his back. He was then detained when he was found without legal documentation, as he was still waiting for the outcome of his request for asylum as a refugee. While in a detention facility, he exchanged refugee application reference numbers with someone, which allowed him to re-apply in the hopes of his application being expedited. He lived at a shelter for some time, but the costs were difficult to afford. He travelled often to the refugee centre to continue the process required for his application, which was successful several months later. He found a job working with heavy machinery that caused him injury to his leg, and he faced difficulty walking for a period of time. Vulnerable in this state, he was robbed one night at the train station, his temporary refugee papers and all of his money taken from him. Robbed of his identity, his legal standing in the country, his hope and his efforts to re-create a life far from Burundi – life became a walk of fear. He was nonetheless optimistic and courageous, an outcome of his fate.

Riots and violence against non-nationals – including harassment by police and campaigns like “Operation Hardstick” where law enforcement officers targeted small informal businesses run by migrants and refugees in the Limpopo province, closing their businesses, detaining owners, confiscating stock, imposing fines and showering verbal abuse (Crush & Chikanda, 2015) – are often met by muted political reactions, and sometimes outright stereotypical xenophobic pronouncements. The latter was exemplified by the former Minister of Small Business Development, Lindiwe Zulu, and her comment that immigrants “need to understand that they are here as a courtesy and our priority is to the people of this country first and foremost” (News24, 2015) and that they are obliged to share their business sense with locals. While Minister Zulu’s statement would seem debilitating to prospects for conviviality, the Somali

Association of South Africa has taken up the call and participates in entrepreneurial and business skills sharing workshops with a diversity of South Africans in township economies. Narratives perpetuated at the state level influence popular perceptions and drive power dynamics at the community level, enabling or inhibiting tolerance amongst locals and non-nationals alike. This issue will be further explored later on in this chapter.

### **Migrant Insecurities and the Concept of “Foreigner” in South Africa**

The insecurities and uncertainties associated with migration, family reunification and economic security highlight the complexities of refugee and migrants’ access to citizenship rights. Insecurities and uncertainties often lead to the perpetuation of temporary roots – a dilemma of permanent up-rootedness. This breeds nostalgia for belonging that immortalises circles of inclusion and exclusion in the quest to strengthen networks, redeem associations and maintain “roots”. In the context of South Africa, the exclusion of Somalis from local society due to legal status as impermanent refugees and threats to public safety has facilitated autonomous circles of inclusion and self-integration in zones such as Bellville. Drawing on the research of Michaela Pelican on Cameroonian migrants in Dubai for comparison, I concluded that Somali migrants in Cape Town also “tend to organise their lives around economic constraints and the caprice of immigration regulations. At the same time, they struggle to create social spaces of mutual comfort and support” (Pelican, 2014:255).

My fieldwork and research in Bellville, Cape Town demonstrates that roots in this community, as in many migrant communities, are often temporary, with allegiances maintained across global networks and transnational channels, as will be explored in the next chapter of this dissertation. In many ways, the Somali community in Bellville, much like other Somali in other “pockets” of the Somali diaspora, is more closely linked up to the “global diaspora” in places where their extended family and kin networks live, than the town next door. Indeed, in order to truly understand the new emerging Somali transnational identity, it is necessary to begin in the field from the “ground up” to understand the profound importance of digital technologies as a platform and definer of identity. The next section describes the experience of Somali refugees in South Africa.

### **Xenophobia in South Africa and the Case of New Spaza Shopkeepers**

The politics of exclusion at many levels of government and society coupled with increasingly challenged notions of citizenship, belonging and access to state resources has led to systemic discrimination against non-nationals and “outsiders”. Somali shopkeepers are targeted and

violently harassed for their success in the informal *spaza* (shop-keeping) economy. As Abdikadir, the regional chairperson of the Somali Association of South Africa, explained, “There is a lot of xenophobia, but it is especially directed towards Somalis because we are developing this country. We are changing things, creating our own futures. In this situation, there will always be opposition.” A Somali man in Bellville named Mohamed analysed the situation as such,

“Why do people hold it in their hearts that they are still at war? There is a deep hatred, perhaps resting on the unsettled past and working into the unforeseen future. Is there hope in the future? Or is violence a response to a broken allegiance with hope, a raw and unforgiving truth that there is and will be competition for money, for shops, for the country. It is an attitude of *look at what my country has done for you....And what about me?*”

In the absence of official data on xenophobic violence, incidences of violence against non-nationals are tracked by the African Centre for Migration and Society through its Xenowatch project (African Centre for Migration and Society, 2017a). According to Xenowatch, between January 2015 and January 2017 across South Africa “nearly 70 people have died, over 100 have been assaulted, close to 600 shops have been looted and over 10,000 people have been displaced due to xenophobic incidents” (African Centre for Migration and Society, 2017b). Survey research conducted in 2016 found that almost half of South Africans wanted foreign nationals to be deported regardless of their legal status (Afrobarometer, 2017). The Human Sciences Research Council conducted a longitudinal study with data from 1990 to the present, showing that South Africa has one of the highest negative perceptions of foreign workers globally (NGO Pulse, 2017). In 2018, the Human Rights Commission led a national investigative inquiry into violence against non-nationals and the effect on social cohesion. Their goal was to address ongoing complaints received “relating to the discrimination, poor treatment and instances of violence committed against foreign nationals across the country” (South African Human Rights Commission, 2018). The majority of complaints related to the right to equality and freedom from discrimination. The report cites that, “Discrimination on the basis of ethnic or social origin have [sic] constituted between 7% and 10% of all equality related complaints, constituting a significant portion” (ibid).

This has had a notable impact on Somali refugees in South Africa, who are often viewed by locals as unwelcome intruders. Pineteh refers to xenophobic violence in post-apartheid South Africa as being characterised “by spatial contests between citizens and non-citizens” (Pineteh, 2018:133). “Spatialised understandings of rights and belonging” are used as “salient tactics to

eliminate ‘unwanted’ Africans and take control of these localities ... This perpetuates an essentialist discourse of belonging amongst many South Africans, which establishes a natural relationship between people and places ... Therefore, xenophobia and its violent undercurrents symbolise a new form of political agency in post-apartheid South Africa, which seeks to defend belonging and citizenship as “autochthonous cultural heritage” (Pineteh, 2018:134). While many locals are loyal customers of Somali traders and entrepreneurs, and benefit from their lower prices and great variety of goods, local shopkeepers allegedly become resentful and fear competition. Gastrow and Amit (2015) explain the reasons for such hostility:

“The antagonism toward these shops is twofold: first, there is a belief that migrant entrepreneurs engage in unfair trade practices that disadvantage South African-owned shops; and second, there is the related notion that the very presence of migrant-owned businesses is illegitimate, and that local South Africans are therefore entitled to take action to remove these businesses” (Gastrow & Amit, 2015:162).

Northcote and Dodson (2015) explain that a significant driver of antagonism is competition between foreign and South African traders for “physical space in trading sites, whether formally or informally managed and controlled” (Northcote & Dodson, 2015:153). They note further that, “Somali traders operating businesses in townships are disproportionately affected by some kinds of crime – particularly business robberies that include looting, arson and murder” (Northcote & Dodson, 2015:159). Charman and Piper have argued that grievances are rooted in a “price-discounting war”, in which the success of foreign-run shops has significantly curtailed the profitability of locally run shops due to the use of price discounting and strategic positioning of the shops (Charman and Piper, 2011:3). Tension manifests because of fundamentally different business practices, where, on the one hand, South African spaza shops maintain prices at levels which permit all shopkeepers equal opportunity; whereas foreign owned spaza shops substantially discount prices to attract customers. These two strategies are characterised as “survivalist” versus “opportunity driven” (Charman and Piper, 2011:4).

The emergence of “new” *spaza* shopkeepers has led to a generalised feeling of distrust amongst South African *spaza* shop owners and manifests in resentment towards those perceived not to belong (Pineteh, 2018; Amit & Gastrow, 2012; Landau, 2011, Steinberg, 2008). As a result of violence and harassment experienced by Somali shopkeepers, several have decided to leave their shops and work as Uber taxi drivers. A YouTube video made by a Somali journalist living in Cape Town documents the experiences of three Somali Uber drivers in South Africa. He explained,

“I interviewed Three Somali Uber drivers one in Cape Town and Two in Johannesburg, they told me two different experience which they have in their work, The one I interviewed in Cape Town said this job is better than the one he had in townships ‘Tuck shop’ ... he makes money in better way he doesn't have any fear while he doing his job, he also said ‘I'm the boss and I'm the employee because I'm the owner of the car and I'm the driver so I can work any time that I want it, I don't have any fear’. The Other two drivers are in Johannesburg, they told me when they were starting this job they face so many problems such us robberies, and others, taxi drivers who attacking Uber drivers, they said ‘This is a nice job but also it has much danger if you are Uber driver in Gauteng’. While I was doing this report, I saw two things. There are more than 100 Somali Uber drivers who are working in Cape Town suburbs. Some of them they sell their shops and they bought cars, some others are just drivers. But in Johannesburg there are six Somali Uber drivers others are just scared to do this job they have the money but they can't go and do because of the fear.”

The experience of exclusion in local society has led to the development of, as Cawo Abdi explains, “Two concurrent forces that shape Somalis’ material and psychological well-being in South Africa: strong religious networks and economic opportunities accompanied by extreme levels of violence and vulnerability. These forces, like so much in contemporary South Africa, emerge from the legacy of apartheid and the country’s complex ethnic and racial groupings” (Abdi, 2015:45). The apartheid government’s strict denial of conviviality through an emphasis on frozen and immobilised identities has left strong remnants in contemporary society. South Africa currently faces the formidable challenge of defrosting the political and social paradigms of the past. As such, urban space continues to be founded on precarity with people living and moving about like Arthur Schopenhauer’s porcupines – with quills that stretch out to detract even the most welcoming of neighbours, making it difficult to navigate the possibilities for intimacy that migrants, in particular, might afford (Schopenhauer cited in Farmer, 1998). From this standpoint, it is clear why many Somali shopkeepers who previously worked in Cape Town’s *spaza* economy started to work with Uber, as described above by my journalist friend. This trend emerges out of Somalis’ navigation of precarity and desire for mobility, achieved through literal mobility and staying “on the move”.

According to interlocutors, some Somali migrants in South Africa have allegedly opted to either return to Somalia or to migrate onwards to new destinations because of the risks to personal security associated with living in South Africa. According to one female Somali interlocutor named Sahra who moved to Cape Town from Mogadishu for her postgraduate studies, her



family was extremely worried about her going to live and study in South Africa. They had heard much negative news about violence targeted against Somalis in the country, particularly since attacks against Somali migrants in Cape Town often involve robbery or murder (Dano, 2017).

### **A Home Away from Home**

Somali refugees in Cape Town have consolidated their own networks based on kinship, region of origin or economic ties to maintain a certain degree of relative autonomy and conditions under which home and belonging emerge. Somali social and economic life in Cape Town is centred in and around Bellville. Many migrants moved to Bellville in search of security in the aftermath of xenophobic attacks in Cape Town. As the former head of the Somali Association of South Africa explained to me, “Many of us first moved to Bellville in 2006. In fact, this was when the xenophobic violence started, in Masiphumelele near Fish Hoek. We were targets so we had to leave.” As Abdikadir expressed, “Humanity, human rights brings us together, let us share what we share and respect non-interference. If we have interference, none of us have security, a home...” Such is the basis of conviviality in Bellville, as it is encouraged by recognition of the potential for destructive relations and a preference of that which is mutually constructive. Determined to succeed despite hardship, Somalis in Bellville rely on, and have created, mechanisms of innovation, business and group hospitality, which enhance prospects for success. As Fatima – a Kenyan-born Somali woman who moved to Cape Town for marriage and because her uncle and family also live there – stated, “Even if a Somali has no formal education, they are good at survival and this translates to business skills.”

Somali born author, Ahmed Ismail Yusuf, describes Somali people as *Waryaa Sayers*, loosely translated as “People of News” (Yusuf, 2012:2). News and news gathering are woven into social experiences and group dynamics. Yusuf refers to three key terms that describe a social and political history of the Somali diaspora, including *Sahan*, *War* and *Matisoor*. As he explains, *Sahan* translates to “pioneer”, referring to one whose journey involves an evaluation of risks and the economic advantages of mobility. *War* translates to “news” and is prefix to countless related phrases, including *waryaa* (people of news), *warran* (give the news), *warrama* (tell us news), *warkaa* (what news) and *warsan* (good news). Somalis returning from a journey will commonly inquire *warran* or “give the news”. *Matisoor* translates to “hospitality”, which forms a critical role in migration, manifested as generosity that is offered to other Somalis, and particularly relating to clan identity. The word *Soomaali* means “help yourself to the milk”. The symbiotic relationship between *Sahan*, *War*, *Matisoor* and *Soomaali* has been in place for centuries in the context of mobile lifestyles in which desires for news served as means for accommodation and survival (Yusuf, 2012:3).

Through their historic mobility and an expansive diaspora network spanning the world, Somalis maintain successful news, business and trade networks, often based upon kinship relations that facilitate access to information, capital, consumer goods and low prices. Somali migrants are able to draw upon networks – which, as described above citing Yusuf (2012), are culturally embedded in social and political history of the Somali. Somali hospitality has become ingrained as social convention, supporting Somali migrants to build personal and business relations and ease into daily life in Bellville.

The clan system is used to identify relatives and to find support by tracing each other back generations through an orally recounted lineage. As Abdikadir – regional director of the Somali Association of South Africa for the Western Cape and a national spokesperson for the organisation – explained to me, it is used for “finding out who is who.” He explained further, “It is expected that any Somali can go to another and will be hosted for a week or so ... Since there are so many Somalis now in Cape Town, you can usually find someone of your clan; otherwise you just go to any Somali.” The importance of clan in Somali heritage creates a situation where individuals immediately experience a degree of belonging as they are welcomed by a member of their clan who is considered family. Jinnah (2017) reiterates from her research with Somali migrants in Johannesburg that,

“Clan membership is instrumental to life in Johannesburg. In the first instance, newly arrived Somalis would contact a member of their clan who would arrange temporary housing, food and even employment. A clan member would assist in transferring of skills, such as how to obtain an asylum seeker permit, how to make purchases in shops, some basic English skills if needed, how to take public transport etc.” (Jinnah, 2017:891).

I sought to understand the differences between clan groups. How do these groups express difference, mutuality and inter-subjectivity in identity? It was explained to me by Abdikadir – the regional director of the Somali Association of South Africa, whose activism on behalf of migrants in South Africa is paramount to civil society’s negotiations with the state on human rights – that,

“Difference is not expressed in a straight forward way. In the West and in many societies, difference is expressed through politics. In Somalia, clan was often used to create enemies. When the dictator was removed, the opposition used clans to incite difference and to gain power. But differences are less prevalent in South

Africa because we are out of our own context. There is no way of expressing difference or using it – maybe only in the heart.”

Upon arriving in a new locality, it is common practice to find or call some other Somali contact within the locality either through referral or by going to a point of communal networking, such as Bellville. The first contact that is established is then responsible for referring the newcomer to someone of their same clan who will be responsible to provide assistance and hospitality. Cell phones play an important role in this networking process and a flurry of phone calls takes place until the newcomer has a host. It was noted that the only downside to this is that, “Your phones are never going to be quiet because you will get calls at night at home about someone coming in” (Huisman et al, 2011:43). The importance of clan in Somali heritage creates a situation where individuals immediately experience a degree of belonging as they are welcomed by a someone who is considered family (often referred to as a sister or cousin, if not literally so). There is also a strong sense of obligation and reciprocity attached to clan membership. Individuals would likely already be connected either as a first connection or via another contact on social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, which helps to formalise the relationship and trust based on shared social capital.

Such transnational networks have assisted international migrants in Bellville to become successful entrepreneurs and business people in the informal economy. Bellville’s CBD is now the epicentre of a booming formal and informal economy where migrants, most of whom are Somali refugees, offer consumer goods at the cheapest price in all of Cape Town. As I observed in Bellville, several Somali migrants have invested in businesses that do not require them to be there on a day-to-day basis, while they work on other entrepreneurial ventures. In this case, they may hire other Somali or local staff to work in their businesses.

There is a high level of competition that takes place in order to secure ownership of a shop in a plaza or shopping centre in Bellville’s central business district, which is a popular shopping area. Somalis who initially migrated to South Africa in the early 1990s have either continued to maintain ownership of their properties over the years or have maintained partial ownership while allowing for newcomers from Somalia to “incubate” by working for their businesses in order to maintain financial standing before becoming self-sufficient to invest in their own businesses. As explained by Abdikadir, “There were maybe four Somalis, each with a 25% share, or then perhaps two would break away and open a new shop, then the original shop would be 50–50 ownership, but there was investment from the others. There was always a sense of trust, so it worked.” In their research on *Somalinomics* (2013, 2015), which explores

the economics of Somali informal trade in the Western Cape region of South Africa, Gastrow and Amit explain,

“Somali entrepreneurs often hold a share in more than one shop. Co-owners set aside shop profits to invest in a second or third shop and then appoint one of the co-owners to manage the new shop, sometimes with the help of an employee. Some co-owners eventually decide to separate and become sole owners of the shops they established together. Among multiple shop owners, most invest in two or three shops, although one respondent owned a small percentage of as many as five shops. His minority shareholding enabled him to spend less time in townships, where he felt unsafe” (Gastrow & Amit, 2015:166).

Somali migrants are also able to enter the market because of their large pools of community funds. In funding their new businesses, many Somali entrepreneurs rely on their tradition of *biil*, which is interest-free money that Somalis pay to family and friends in need. *Biil* is also to pay for health care, rent, food or other needs for those who are unemployed or simply in need of help, particularly as newcomers (Huisman et al, 2011:186). It was described as “the same thing as family bills, like those that are paid monthly”. As one of my contacts from Bellville said during an interview, “When newcomers arrive, it is expected that the Somali community will help them, or that help will be provided. For Somalis, home is open.” Abdikadir explained that there is a group of decision makers selected in the Somali community, but they are not called “leaders” per say. These decision makers decide what contribution the community can provide to new or incoming Somalis from *biil* funds. This is an example of a support network that encourages the idea of “accommodating to be accommodated”, a theme that has been recurrent in my research and fieldwork (Brudvig, 2014).

In another instance, a young Somali man named Hassan – whom I got to know during my fieldwork and who was new to South Africa during the time of our first interaction but has since lived in the country for five years, and even returned to Somalia to get married – was able to open a street-side trading stall where he sells sweets, snacks, cigarettes and soft drinks in a busy area of Bellville. The shop comprises a table underneath a shaded tent which is shared with another shopkeeper who sells groceries. He claimed, “I am out there all day.” He struck a deal with a Somali wholesaler where he can take out stock for free in the morning and he only has to pay at the end of the day based on what has sold. He has to return the stock to the supplier, (who is also based in Bellville) nightly, and he opens the shop at 6:00 am each day. If he needs more stock, he simply collects it from the supplier. While sitting at the shop I observed my interlocutor’s business partner leave to collect more cigarettes to sell. Somali

migrants are able to draw upon social conventions that cultivate networks through hospitality and trust in order to build new business opportunities, establish and grow capital and minimise the risks of doing business.

### **New Channels for Micro-convivial Encounters Enhance Personal Networks**

In addition to providing opportunities for Somalis new to South Africa, migrant-owned businesses frequently offer work opportunities to South Africans, providing employment for labourers, who often face barriers to entering the workforce. One interlocutor named Siphso, who is from the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, came to Cape Town several years ago. He didn't know Bellville very well but came to the area to look for a job. He noted that, "You can get jobs in Bellville; there are lots of Somali shops." The best thing about Bellville is that "there is too much business; there is nothing in the townships." Bellville is known as a place of employment for both migrants and locals. Siphso used to work at Debonairs, a local pizza restaurant chain, but "the pay was too low". This implies that Bellville's salaries were viewed as being relatively competitive.

South African consumers and merchants are also increasingly dependent upon the low-cost goods and conviviality provided by Somalis in Bellville. While observing the stall mentioned above located in a busy street in Bellville, it was explained to me that "everyone comes here, especially the people who work around the area who are regulars". I observed a woman, seemingly in her 30s with a Cape Malay accent and who said she comes to Bellville for her shopping and errands, store her grocery bags behind the counter of the shop for safekeeping, and returned later to collect them. Another local customer, a woman working in the area who was in a hurry, en route from the train to wherever she was going, arrived at the stall and paid one Rand for a scoop of peanuts – the Somali stall owner encouraged her to please take more. Two young girls wearing colourful hijabs ran back and forth to the shop to carefully select sweets of their liking. Although, during this time, Hassan had been selling goods there for five years – and had even been married in that time – he told me, "They still call me 'the little boy' ... even though now I'm 27 years old." It was clear that based on his prominent public position selling on a central, busy street in Bellville, he had developed networks of conviviality that were key to his future in South Africa, and indeed, his own mobility. Gastrow and Amit (2015) also highlight that many South African traders have seized new economic advantages by becoming landlords and renting out their shops to enable them to engage in other businesses. Thus, rather than the narratives of "invasion" and "dissatisfaction" that are often portrayed in the context of Somali *spaza* traders and local economies, we see that active collaboration takes place based on identification of mutual advantages and conviviality.

**Case study: Relationships of Conviviality in Bellville**

One day while in Bellville, I was sitting with Hodan in a small public square lined with traders and market dealers. Hodan is a 21-year old Somali women who usually wears a black hijab outlining her round face and her bright eyes are lined with makeup. Hodan shares duties with her younger sister Maryam working at their family's shop consisting of a metal structure and display tables that are assembled daily and display clothing, belts, bags and accessories. Hodan and Maryam are often accompanied by their younger brother whom they are tasked with caring for while their parents work in separate shops in and around Bellville.

Hodan casually slipped some money into the hands of a man who walked past. The man didn't appear to be Somali, and I asked her who he is. Hodan explained that this man owns the metal structure and hangers that her mom's stand is built with. The young man (of about 25 years of age) comes to the same spot where we were sitting in the square daily to assemble the structure in the morning, and to assist with hanging the clothes on metal rods that form a square overhead. Hodar explained, "I give him money for lunch and sometimes a few times a day...It's because he puts up the metal and hangers." As she finished explaining, another smiley Somali boy who I recognised as attending the Bellville Education Centre, an educational initiative of the Somali Association of South Africa, stopped by and they chatted casually. A few customers came to look at underwear displayed on the metal hangers, and Hodor told them they cost R15 per pair. I assumed that the man who assembled the structure would be back at the end of the day to disassemble it, and so the cycle of convivial encounters would continue the following day.

Bellville represents the known fact that African cities and urban spaces are characterised by mobility and migration. James Clifford's (1997) suggestion of "dwelling-in-travel" describes the liminal zone of Bellville, as it is a place of temporary roots. However, for many, Bellville has also become a home away from home. "Home" in Bellville is related to the importance of safety and of livelihood opportunities which are situated in the context of violence and exclusions elsewhere. The sentiment of home in Bellville rests on a collective recognition of Bellville as a "safe" place, which is critical in the context of the potential for violence and intimidation elsewhere. Conviviality emerges through the formation of tactual alliances, as they are often crafted out of mutual need – a reciprocity that holds great value in the context of urban mobility. As this section has demonstrated, Somali migrants in Cape Town draw on social conventions and group hospitality to navigate uncertainties and immobilities associated with the future. As

such, the Bellville central business district demonstrates the realities of interconnected local and global networks of conviviality and belonging and how they emerge in a world of accelerated mobility.

The next sections of this chapter question the extent to which South Africa's migration policy is supportive of refugees and migrants. It will demonstrate the pitfalls and limitations of international refugee protection conventions and South Africa's refugee policy. Analysis of the policy frameworks, and implementation of such, demonstrates the limited extent to which migrants and asylum seekers are able to access their legal rights and services, and indeed, navigate their (im)mobility and belonging in South Africa. Crippling administration of refugee policies as well as general lack of political will towards refugee rights restrict Somali migrants' access to rights and citizenship. This has limited trajectories towards multiculturalism and conviviality in South Africa. ICTs have emerged as significant enablers of mobility in the context of Somali immobility in South Africa and worldwide.

### **Refugee Policy and its Limitations in South Africa**

This section draws on international legal instruments and South Africa's refugee policy, as well as the implementation of it through legal and administrative structures. It seeks to demonstrate the inadequacies of the international refugee protection regime and what this means for a majority of residents in Bellville, Cape Town, who are Somali refugees, who, in their hopes for mobility, are met with institutions that, while intending to facilitate mobility, are forces of immobility.

The international refugee protection conventions, consisting of the 1951 and 1967 Conventions and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) mandate, are intended to secure refugee protection and rights. However, the challenges of accessing these demonstrate the trials and tribulations of institutionalising human rights. Crippling bureaucracies associated with refugee conventions and policies, as well as growing lack of political will of states towards refugee rights, limits Somali migrants' citizenship status, as well as trajectories towards multicultural conviviality in South Africa. This point is reiterated by Jonny Steinberg (2008) who writes,

“On paper, South African policy is open and sophisticated. The government has signed all major international instruments concerning the rights of refugees. Refugees are entitled to work, to receive medical treatment, to live where they want, to send their children to South African schools. As for undocumented migrants, former President

Mbeki often said that there is little the country can do to stop their influx, and that it is for South Africans to let them be, and to live with them. Yet between law and the practice of state officials there is a yawning gulf. Foreigners, whether undocumented or with refugee status, are turned away from public hospitals as a matter of course. Their children are at times refused entry to state schools. In parts of the country, law enforcement officials routinely tear up the legitimate South African identity documents of foreign born South African nationals on the grounds that their accents are foreign. Across the country, migrants are among the softest targets for government officials in search of graft. The result is that each and every state agency tasked with dealing with foreign nationals is riddled in corruption” (Steinberg, 2008:11–2).

Limited access to rights greatly influences experiences of belonging, as well as the extent to which Somali migrants seek future mobility. Understanding the political economy of asylum seeking and “becoming a refugee” in South Africa provides the grounds for understanding their relative exclusion from local society, and the significance of digital technologies in the context of their mobility and spaces of belonging.

#### *States Guard their Identities and Leverage Sovereignty as a Protective Weapon*

In today’s world of international relations, states guard their moral identities and commitments to human rights by falling back on their signature to key documents, frameworks and protocols. However, these documents have become mere instruments of the state (Loescher, 2003:6). This has become ever more so apparent with the near instantaneous changes in immigration policy by US President Trump, with his executive order on immigration, banning citizens from seven majority Muslim nations including Somalia from entering the United States. This policy measure violates international refugee law, including the right to apply for asylum and the principle of non-refoulement (or, not forcing asylum seekers to return to contexts where they may face persecution). The manner in which states integrate refugee rights into domestic policy – and the extent to which bureaucracy enables for administrative access to stated rights – demonstrates not only the extent of their commitments to human rights, but the extent to which they are committed to supporting cultural diversity with a hospitable civic order, a critical trajectory for cosmopolitanism and liberal democratic state identity (Gilroy, 2005:2).

The international refugee protection regime consists of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1967 Protocol and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) mandate. While adoption of these frameworks by states should imply the sovereign prerogative for signatories to uphold commitments to refugees, this has not been



the general trend. Instead, the concept of sovereignty is used by states such as South Africa as a protective weapon to guard against an influx of non-nationals. In South Africa, this has led to a crisis of increasing xenophobia at the state level, a political attitude that has filtered through society leading to widespread violence against foreigners in past years.

Responsibilities to refugees and asylum seekers are increasingly manipulated by South Africa, despite being signatory to international conventions. The closure of critically located refugee offices in South Africa – and the failure to reopen refugee administration centres despite the order of the Supreme Court to open an office by the end of March 2018 (Palm, 2018) – compounded with the detention, deportation and criminalisation of non-nationals and the propagation of public xenophobic perspectives through the media are examples of how South Africa has internalised this trend and instigated a discourse of “insiders” and “outsiders”. The closure of the refugee office in Cape Town means that Somali refugees in Cape Town need to travel in person to one of three offices including Pretoria, Musina or Durban – likely the centre where the application was first lodged – every one to six months to renew the permit, after the initial one-month permit that is given. According to one interlocutor, this is especially difficult for students who often don’t have the time or money to make the trip so frequently, and is an exceptional struggle for those with jobs and businesses, mothers travelling with children and the elderly. As research by Northcote and Dodson (2015) argues, travelling and waiting in queues to renew permits every one to six months also has a serious impact on income earning. Many refugees and asylum seekers in Cape Town work in “casual labour livelihoods” and in “day labour” (Northcote and Dodson, 2015:147), and “each day spent queuing at Home Affairs means a day not spent working, and thus not earning any income” (Northcote and Dodson, 2015:151). According to the Scalabrini Centre – an organisation that provides legal, welfare, employment and educational services to refugees and asylum seekers, the closure of refugee administration offices has halved the capacity of the Department of Home Affairs to receive refugees. According to Scalabrini Centre’s advocacy officer, many asylum seekers have to wait months for appointments just to lodge their asylum applications and obtain permits (with appointments backlogged into 2019 at the time of writing). Asylum seekers then have to wait even longer for a refugee status determination interview. As a result, “people are undocumented for long periods of time, subjecting them to detention/deportation.” As a result, there are allegedly “many examples of people giving up and going back to Somalia, only to come back again after fearing persecution and safety matters, and their files are still open and valid so they just resume them.”

Systemic challenges hinder the Department of Home Affairs' capacity to receive and process new applications. However, as Fassin et al (2017), argue, this may be strategic. They argue that South Africa's apparent inefficacy in managing asylum seeking is due to:

"The contradictory logics of a politics of ambivalence that combines formal principles of international protection and constitutional jurisprudence granting socioeconomic rights with restrictive measures to control immigration flows: in sum, a peculiar mix of idealism, realism, and pragmatism. One singularity of the system is that it obliges applicants to renew their permit, usually every six months, under extremely constraining circumstances (distance, induced costs, and time spent queuing), resulting in a high proportion of applicants being forced to give up their claims. Outcomes of the process of asylum seeking are thus not only admissions and rejections but also—and probably most often—withdrawals" (Fassin et al, 2017:176).

In line with their argument, there has been a marked downward trend in asylum applications since the closure of critically located refugees' offices. The number of official asylum claims in South Africa decreased from 62,159 recorded cases in 2015 to around 25,000 in 2017 (South African Department of Home Affairs, 2017:10).

A "chain of transfer of responsibility" (De Jong, 1998:692) and widespread denial of states to respect their responsibilities towards refugees signal that international refugee conventions have been interpreted in isolation of commitments to international human rights law. In South Africa the administrative failure that compounds legal proceedings has resulted in the maintenance of a state of perpetual liminality for many migrants, as their legal positioning and access to basic human rights are thwarted by periods of waiting. As Sutton et al write, "Waiting ... is a highly subjective emotion linked to endurance, hope, impatience and, for refugees facing the considerable threat of being an illegal immigrant who can be thrown out of the country, outright anger, fear and dread" (Sutton et al, 2011:32). In practice, these processes (though intended to protect) only further incite insecurity in dealing with state institutions and in the reflections in local society. As cited in a local South African media article headline,

"Refugees' miseries have only begun when they reach SA: Asylum permit backlogs have nearly crippled Home Affairs' refugee services, and left hundreds of thousands of desperate people mired in uncertainty" (Collins, 2018).

The Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town, an organisation that provides legal, welfare, employment and educational services to refugees has stated that,

“Protection for refugees is deeply compromised. The refugee office ... is closed, which is the consequence of a system that has no integrity. In terms of immigrants, there is no legal pathway to access a legal stay in South Africa ... immigrants who come here are not properly managed, and they and their families suffer as a consequence” (May, 2018).

The non-governmental organisation, Lawyers for Human Rights, has also stated that South Africa's refugee laws are “not being applied in the right manner by the Home Affairs Department” (Lindeque, 2017). The organisation has described the Department of Home Affairs as “institutionally xenophobic”, with 96% of refugee applications rejected in the first place (Postman, 2018).

### *Who is a Refugee?*

Evasion of South Africa's responsibilities to international conventions has been possible without legal consequence or significant international scrutiny due to the blurred definition of who is a refugee. So who is a refugee? The definition of a refugee as declared by the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees is largely ambiguous. The Convention defines a refugee as anyone who:

“Owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UNHCR, 2006).

This global refugee definition speaks directly to a post-World War II era (Steinbock, 1999:18), one prior to our world of global mobility and flows. Broad social categories included in the definition for reasons of persecution (e.g. race and religion) leave room for narrow interpretation of these concepts. As Steinbock states, “The text of the refugee definition constitutes what might be described as the boundary of its application” (Steinbock, 1999:17). However, the 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa – the regional legal instrument governing refugee protection in Africa – expands on the global definition to include anyone who:

“Owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing or disrupting public order in either a part or the whole of his or her country

of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his or her place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge elsewhere” (Organization of African Unity (OAU), 1969).

This definition, which South Africa has adopted in its Refugees Act, is based on disruption of public order. Many (if not all) Somali asylum seekers should qualify as refugees under this definition.

The refugee definition is also reflective of the agency migrants exercise in the face of the boundaries of its application, as asylum seekers seek to manoeuvre the system by claiming refugee status by every means possible – including unauthorised ways, such as switching identities. While to some this may appear dishonest, one may further consider that it might simply be the only alternative to getting by. Fassin et al (2017) refer to asylum as a “form of life”, as asylum seekers live in a state of “indeterminacy” and in legal limbo for years. They argue that,

“This limbo epitomizes the profound ambivalence of the South African state, which acknowledges the right to protection but hinders access to it, which tolerates the presence of hundreds of thousands of people seeking refuge but submits them to continual police interrogation and harassment, which provides constitutional protections and socioeconomic rights to non-nationals but allocates these haphazardly and unevenly, which generates a bureaucracy to assess individual cases but gives it notoriously insufficient means ... By keeping people for years in the ineffective process of evaluating their claim, by maintaining them in the permanent vulnerability of the renewal of their permit, by progressively excluding them from the system through administrative obstacles and discretionary decisions, and by alternatively ignoring the illegal situation in which they end up and the extreme exploitation which that situation allows and then suddenly enforcing the law in the most relentless way ... the state produces ... and qualifies a form of life” (Fassin et al, 2017:163–4).

While the refugee definition stifles its protective capacity, migrants who fall in the face of its narrow interpretation may choose simply to not conform, opting instead to ‘stick it out’, despite shattered hopes and unclear expectations. Some may seek to manipulate structures in place, in which networks of social capital may provide useful channels to “make a plan” to secure protection, even if it means compromising their personal security and legality.

### *The Making of “Refugees” as a Categorical Means of Classification, Control and Containment*

The refugee protection regime suffers from its own inadequate definition of a refugee, as it lacks coherence and leaves judgment at the discretion of the South African state. While in many countries the UNHCR oversees refugee applications and administration, South Africa has retained this responsibility which is directed through its Ministry of Home Affairs. The state demonstrates its role in processes of “subject making” (Mamdani, 1996) or, as Foucault would say, the “different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects”, including through “dividing practices” (Rabinow, 1984). The subject’s social and personal identity is objectified through a process of division, either within himself or from others. The basis of such objectivation is a process of exclusion. This relates to the making of “refugees” as a categorical means of classification, control and containment, situated within a “tradition of humanitarian rhetoric on reform and progress” (Rabinow, 1984:8) and the aggregation of power through discursive practices. These issues speak to Harri Englund’s suggestion, that the universalism of human rights is often sacrificed to “political expediency” (Englund, 2006:47).

### *Refugee “Protection” Has Become a System of Self-Defence*

Refugee protection is ideally a system of enabling access to justice. However, in South Africa, refugee “protection” has become a system of self-defence, a test of one’s true limits of fear, as immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers are treated as criminals – scapegoated for crimes, punished for not having appropriate documentation (which itself is the fault of administrative failures of the government) and violently harassed when successful in long-term business goals. Creating a new life in South Africa as a refugee is a walk of fear. As one man who claimed refugee status told me during my fieldwork in Bellville, “The police forget that we all have the right to live – they treat us as a criminal before having the chance to even just be a suspect.” This situation further incites Giorgio Agamben’s concept of Homo Sacer – in that the sovereign state (of exception) creates mechanisms through which human lives become the objects of political strategy, and therefore of a general strategy of power. Without access to full citizenship rights in any country – without a defined relationship with a state, “situated at the margins of the political order” (Agamben, 1995:6) – asylum seekers may represent Agamben’s concept of “bare life”. Control of bare life through “mechanisms of control” (Foucault, 2007) represents the state’s consolidation of “bio-power”. By placing biological life at the centre of its controls, the modern state brings to light the secret tie uniting modern consolidations of power and bare life (Agamben, 1995:5). The exceptional state of sovereignty and its power over “bare life” have tremendous significance to the relationship between refugees and the state, as well as the role that Bellville, and indeed, personal social

networks managed via social media, play in accommodating needs for safety, protection and belonging in the absence of legal support, and a culture of exclusion.

Changes in the world over the past fifty years have fostered new uses of the concept of the sovereign nation-state, which has had profound implications on refugee protection. Disjunctures between space, place, citizenship and nationhood have led to increasing territoriality as a rationale for state legitimacy and power (Appadurai, 2003:341). Sovereignty is increasingly used to overrule international institutions – to consolidate power – leading to a generalised lack of political will to protect migrants and weak moral commitment to the refugee protection framework. This is demonstrated through the implementation of bureaucratic and often un-transparent, changing procedures that limit access to rights. This perpetuates a state of “bare life” for many refugees, who are subject to arrest and intimidation. Refugees experience many intersecting liminalities (or, states of limbo), both in their own localities and also across geographies through their families. For example, in May 2016 the Kenyan government announced that Dadaab refugee camp near the Somali border would be shut down, citing security concerns, and about 260,000 Somali refugees would be forcibly repatriated. This bid was blocked by the Kenyan High Court, citing group persecution and discrimination (BBC, 2017a). Cumulatively, limited political will towards refugee rights has hindered the ability of civil society, such as legal aid organisations, to protect persecuted and displaced people independent of the state. This has led to a situation of “self-integration” and “self-protection” in zones of migration such as Bellville’s central business district (CBD) area in Cape Town, and others such as Mayfair in Johannesburg and Eastleigh in Nairobi.

### *South Africa’s Migration and Refugee Framework*

South Africa’s international migration policy was initially stipulated in its 1999 White Paper on International Migration. This policy was updated in 2016 and a new policy on International Migration was adopted in 2017. The 2017 White Paper on International Migration is supported by the Immigration Act of 2002 and the Refugee Act of 1998 (which was also amended in 2017). Reform of South Africa’s international migration policy was necessary, given the fact that South Africa has emerged as a major regional economic hub and migration destination over the past twenty years. The International Organisation for Migration estimates that the total migrant population (legal and irregular) in South Africa rose from 2% of the population in 2000 to over 5.5% in 2015 (SA Green Paper, 2016). It is worth noting, however, that this statistic was cited in an interview as “A guess as much as any others. A whole history of wild guesses.”

*Defining Migration Policy as a Temporary Status Hinders Access to Public Social Services and Perpetuates “Foreign-ness”*

The 2017 South African policy on international migration takes the position that migration should be in line with national development goals, which are framed around economic growth, sovereignty and national security. Migration is often referred to as a threat to national interest, and policy reforms appear to have been driven by security concerns. The new policy states that “South Africa has become an attractive destination for irregular migrants (undocumented migrants, border jumpers, over-stayers, smuggled and trafficked persons) who pose a security threat to the economic stability and sovereignty of the country” (SA White Paper, 2017:35).

Policy reforms are largely defined in the context of stricter control of immigration, securitisation, sovereignty and protection of borders. The implementation of such measures is evident with the introduction of a Border Management Authority Bill which would reposition the Department of Home Affairs “within the security system of the State so that it contributes to national security and is able to protect its people, systems and data” (South Africa Department of Home Affairs, 2017:11). According to one interlocutor, the Border Management Authority Bill is concerning because “It will facilitate a ‘one stop shop’ where the desirable/undesirable migrants can be sorted and deported all under one roof away from the cities ... and Department of Home Affairs will run it.” When reviewing the initial 2016 Green Paper that was tabled for debate, there were concerns raised by civil society surrounding the proposed policy measures for “management of asylum seekers and refugees”, including that refugees should not be allowed to apply for permanent residence on the grounds of the number of years spent in the country. This reiterates that the status of refugees is “inherently temporary” and reaffirms that “refugees are expected to return to their country of origin once conditions there allow them to return safely” (SA Green Paper, 2016: 40–41). Migration policy reforms are characterised by the “legal production of illegality”, a notion stipulated by De Genova, who argues that “Illegality is lived through a palpable sense of deportability – the possibility of deportation, which is to say, the possibility of being removed from the space of the ... nation-state” (De Genova, 2004:161). As one interlocutor explained, “It creates a web where illegality is the only possible outcome especially when you consider it in the context of how the Department of Home Affairs operates and treats asylum seekers.”

The Green Paper also called for new policies to clamp down on economic migrants’ ability to seek asylum to live and work in South Africa. It referred to administrative detention centres “established within the processing centres to accommodate certain categories of asylum seekers while their claims are being adjudicated” (SA Green Paper, 2016:65). This raises

concerns about human rights violations, most notably that other such detention centres, including in Australia and Italy, have been documented as being “human rights catastrophes” (Davidson, 2016; Amnesty International, 2009). While this specific language was not adopted in the 2017 White Paper, the political sentiments expressed in the 2016 Green Paper have the potential to foster discrimination and “ghettoisation” of migrant communities, leading to lack of social cohesion and poor cross-cultural understanding.

The state of impermanence and limbo perpetuated by this situation potentially hinders access to public social services, and cultivates discrimination against non-nationals in accessing their rights to such services. For example, migrants in South Africa have reported being denied treatment by public health services (IOL, 2017), as evidenced when a pregnant woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo was turned away from two hospitals, forcing her to give birth in the train station in Johannesburg, after which she was taken to a third hospital and was denied care again. For Somali women whose English is often limited, accessing health services in South Africa can be a challenge. As one Somali woman lamented, “There are pregnant women, women who have had a baby and now have psychological difficulty. Women may go to the hospital and some people have allegedly claimed to have been turned away if a nurse doesn’t like foreigners. Then the woman goes home with her sick baby and waits for days perhaps.” Furthermore, it has been alleged that, “Often schools say to foreigners, ‘no, we are full’ and they turn the mother and child away”. These occurrences are by no means evidence of institutionalised discrimination, but are merely exceptional situations that Somalis and other migrants have experienced. As a result of these challenges, a young Somali woman who is eighteen years old emphasised that she will not get married until she learns English, and would only marry a man who speaks English. She claimed, “I don’t want to be married and have children and then I want to write my name and my child’s name or go to the hospital, my husband has to do everything and I don’t even know what he’s writing. I need to be able to do it on my own.” She highlighted further, “I am not even thinking about marriage anyways, all I want to do is learn to read.”

The exact number of refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa is difficult to determine, due to discrepancies in reported data between the UNHCR and the Department of Home Affairs. According to the Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa, “A number of sources have challenged the accuracy of current data and the methods used to record data by the Department of Home Affairs” (SIHMA, 2018:1). It has, however, been widely acknowledged that South Africa has become a significant refugee “receiving” country in the last decade. In June 2016 the UNHCR published a report based on 2015 global trends in forced displacement. According to the report, the number of asylum claims in South Africa had risen to 1,096,063



by the end of 2015. This figure was quickly picked up by popular media to announce that South Africa had “1 million asylum seekers”. However, the report further explained that the increase in the number of asylum seekers was not due to an actual spike in numbers of people, but rather as a result of a “change in methodology due to the historical underreporting [by South African officials] of this population” (Stupart, 2016). The report carried an additional note suggesting that, “The high figure is due to the South African legal framework for asylum applications having no provision for the withdrawal of asylum applications once lodged” (ibid). The poor recording of data and inaccuracies in records have led to flawed estimates of asylum claims and migration in the country. Discrepancies in data coming from South Africa have skewed aggregated global migration data figures, which may have even inflated the actual number of people seeking asylum worldwide and political reactions. Additionally, as we will explore in the next section, online hate speech directed at non-nationals further conjures up the spread of false data, misinformation and public distrust, limiting conviviality, social inclusion and belonging.

#### *Hate Speech Directed against Non-Nationals Conjures up Public Distrust and Limits Understanding*

The Citizen Research Centre analysed xenophobic attitudes in South Africa on social media platforms over a six-year period. The research found that xenophobic social media posts make up between 8% and 28% of all conversation, depending on the year (Jones & Henkeman, 2017). Hate speech against non-nationals is inflamed during periods of violent unrest, and is often provoked by political statements made by politicians against immigrants. For example, when the Mayor of Johannesburg, Herman Mashaba, was quoted as saying, “(Illegal immigrants) are holding our country to ransom and I am going to be the last South African to allow it” (*Daily Maverick*, 2017), he not only incited physical violence, but also online violence. Hate speech against foreigners, associating them with crime, rose to 13% of the total conversation following his statement (Jones & Henkeman, 2017).

In addition to direct discrimination and threats of violence, political statements on immigration filter through society and conjure up public distrust and fear of migrants. For example, the South African Minister of Home Affairs called for South Africa to “tighten its immigration policies and strictly protect its borders – even if this is labelled anti-African behaviour” (Bendile, 2017). The media plays a strong role in creating and disseminating public perceptions of immigrants. Media and policy discussions rely on shorthand descriptions and labels to refer to complex events, including incidents in which immigrants are subjected to popular violence. In this context, any time a phenomenon is distinctly labelled, there is a risk of reducing people

and events to their perceived common features which creates and perpetuates a limited, and often detrimental, understanding. This can help to explain the causes of apparently related events, but when the task is to report disparate events as they occur, blanket generalisations can conceal as much as they reveal. Getting to the root causes of each incident may require time and resources that journalists may not have to dedicate to each story. It is important that the media take precaution in using terminology that amplifies victimisation or glosses over the agency of both victims and perpetrators.

The institutional state and media driven representations of xenophobia and “foreignness” in South Africa (and indeed increasingly in many other liberal democratic societies) plays a significant role in how migrant and refugee rights are understood and upheld in communities of diversity. In the context of South Africa, opportunist attitudes towards non-nationals reflect societal perceptions of entitlement for citizens over non-citizens and become “rationalised”, because they are often committed by those in power.

#### *“Xenophobia” as a Means to Garner Public and Media Attention, Using Non-Nationals as Scapegoats*

A Somali man in Bellville named Ahmed who has lived in South Africa for over ten years, now working as an accountant in his own firm, explained to me that, “South African people are not xenophobic, it is their leaders that are.” Fatima reiterated, based on her experience having grown up in Kenya where there are many Somali refugees, that, “In a way there is greater understanding of Somali people in South Africa (than in other countries of asylum). Somalis are able to integrate by going to school and creating business and this leads to a greater understanding” – (as opposed to having to live in a refugee camp away from public life). It was explained to me by several interlocutors that violence against non-nationals erupts because it is a mechanism for finding public voice and political agency. Communities across South Africa feel unheard and forgotten, even when they voice their civic and public concerns. Violence targeted against non-nationals is used as a strategic tactic to garner public and media attention; it is deployed as a way for community concerns to be heard.

Public attention in response to violence and xenophobia brings a platform for the community to voice its broader concerns. If this is the case, it may be argued that xenophobic violence is used as a means of demanding public accountability. This view was reiterated in an article by Fatima Kahn, Director of the Refugee Rights Clinic and member of the University of Cape Town Law Faculty, who stated in an Op-Ed that, “In the event of poor service delivery or any restrictions on public goods or services by the government, communities inevitably blame and

often target foreign nationals” (Kahn, 2018). She describes the example that, “Recently a row of public toilets were removed by the Cape Town City Council in Du Noon following allegations of high water consumption due to car washers operating in the area. In response, community members started protesting against the removal of the toilets and, not long thereafter, a number of foreign nationals fell victim to violent attacks” (ibid). Pineteh refers to xenophobic violence in post-apartheid South Africa as being characterised “by spatial contests between citizens and non-citizens” (Pineteh, 2018:133). “Spatialised understandings of rights and belonging” are used as “salient tactics to eliminate ‘unwanted’ Africans and take control of these localities ... This perpetuates an essentialist discourse of belonging amongst many South Africans, which establishes ‘a natural relationship between people and places ... Therefore, xenophobia and its violent undercurrents symbolise a new form of political agency in post-apartheid South Africa, which seeks to defend belonging and citizenship as “autochthonous cultural heritage”” (Pineteh, 2018:134).

As I probed further into what was fuelling violence against non-nationals and the discourse of xenophobia, several interlocutors explained to me that ward councillors and municipal officials allegedly stir up the public by saying they will bring more economic opportunities to the community and “give back what is being taken away from them by foreigners”. This rhetoric, especially if coming from officials, effectively scapegoats non-nationals for economic disenfranchisement. This rhetoric was used strategically to get public support in the run up to municipal elections, which took place in 2016. Ahmed reiterated that this happened in municipalities where the opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), gained increasing support against the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC). Outbreaks of violence against foreign-owned homes and *spaza* shops were reported in Pretoria following the election of the Democratic Alliance in the municipality (Areff & Du Plessis, 2016; Ndlazi & Moatshe, 2017). According to media coverage, a Somali business owner in the town of Atteridgeville fled to nearby Pretoria after an attack and remarked, “Local community leaders came to us and they said, ‘You must leave this area within one month’”, he told Voice of America Somali Service. He explained that locals accused non-nationals of stealing their jobs and robbing people. “They told us, if we don’t leave the city within that time [before February 24th], that they will loot our businesses, then kill us.” (Solomon, 2017). If the rhetoric of xenophobia is utilised strategically for political motives, as highlighted by several interlocutors, political leaders succeed by fuelling the anger of the poor, unemployed and working class, and redirecting this anger towards immigrants.

Lastly, it was explained to me that crime is subtly condoned due to the level of impunity, with acts of violence being ill-reported and investigations failing to be carried out. One contact

explained to me that, in his view, reporting of crime is discouraged, because it will drive up statistics which the media will use and will portray a province (such as the Western Cape), and its law enforcement officials negatively. He explained,

“Then the law enforcement and police departments will gain attention and be under scrutiny to become more accountable. The government will ask what are they doing in their jobs and with the resources. Look what happened in 2010, with the World Cup. Why can’t this be done in other areas on a continual basis? It shows that it’s possible to stop crime, but there is no political will.”

These views indicate that, according to several interlocutors whom I interviewed, xenophobia is an outcome of poor governance, lack of accountability of government to citizens, and their diminishing public voice and political agency; coupled with economic insecurity and its effects on social reproduction and mobility, crime and impunity in the justice system. This demonstrates how forms of sovereign power are conceptualised and made socially effective through particular symbolic devices (Gupta, 2012), often rooted in personal power and gain.

#### *Violence against Non-Nationals is Heightened by Misinformation*

Narratives perpetuated at the state level influence popular perceptions and drive power dynamics at the community level, enabling or inhibiting conviviality. The closure of critically-located refugee offices in South Africa, the detention, deportation, legal limbo and criminalisation of non-nationals, and the propagation of a discourse of xenophobia through the media are examples of how South Africa has internalised a discourse of “insiders” and “outsiders”. As noted in the World Economic Forum’s report (2017) on *Migration and its Impact on Cities*, “Community and political leaders may set the tone for how residents respond, as their language and attitudes often contribute to escalating or neutralising a volatile situation” (World Economic Forum, 2017:109).

False news circulating on social media amplifies a context of misinformation and fear surrounding xenophobia and violence in general. According to Africa Check, a non-profit organisation that promotes accuracy and counters misinformation in the media and public debate, “Fake news and misinformation are fuelling bloody xenophobic clashes in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent” (Solomon, 2017). One of my Somali friends sent me a voice note which had been circulating on WhatsApp, with the following information:

“On the second of November there will be a security strike and they are going to close all the airports, the planes are not going to fly. They are going to close the train stations so trains won’t drive, there won’t be trains available. They are going to close all malls, the malls won’t operate. If there are any rats in their organisation they are going to kill the rats in the organisation, that is what they are talking about ... then they say that they do have apartheid, the blacks say they do not want *makwerekwere*, they do not want foreigners in South Africa anymore, because the foreigners are stealing their money and their bread ... They said they are going to bring the whole country to standstill and I can tell you know that is possible ... So yeah, I think you can tell your colleagues, bosses, friends and family that on the second just stay out of trouble, stay out of shit, stay out of trains and airports and malls because I know these guys get violent. We had a security strike almost three years ago where they killed almost 150 people ...” (voice note, 30 October 2017).

It also included photos of gang violence, which officials subsequently reported were fake images. A community leader of the Somali Association of South Africa explained to me that violence targeting Somali shopkeepers in Soweto, Johannesburg in August 2018 was due to rumours that circulated on Facebook and WhatsApp. He explained that, allegedly, the original allegations that businesses were selling counterfeit and expired consumable products were towards Chinese-owned shops, but “a picture was taken and the narrative was changed to say it was Somali shopkeepers.” In another instance, Hania, a Somali woman with children both in Somalia and in South Africa, voiced her fear after receiving a WhatsApp message on one of the message groups she was part of, which said that “on Monday all foreigners, whether legal or not will be forced to leave South Africa.” She was fearful of using public taxis as a result, understanding that “they will stop all the taxis and look for any foreigners and there will be trouble for us.”

Indeed, the design of digital social media platforms prioritises popular content with high rates of engagement, therefore increasing the virality of fake news and other sensationalist content on people’s social media newsfeeds. As observed by Narayanan et al, “Social media algorithms can be purposefully used to distribute polarising political content and misinformation” (Narayanan et al, 2018:1). Trends toward the spread of misinformation online have the potential to incite fear and discriminatory social norms both across different social groups and within groups, driven by the “danger of a single story” (Adichie, 2009). A journalist from Somalia living in South Africa named Abdulahi Qorshe, a correspondent for the Somali national television station who also runs his own independent YouTube channel called Somsa24, documenting experiences of Somalis in South Africa, summed it up well:

“Technology especially internet and social media brings people together but to a certain extent. The internet for example makes it very easy to contact relatives and friends back home and elsewhere through the use of social network platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook and enables people to follow current developments in politics and in South Africa cheaply and without much effort. With this however comes fake news and the spread of propaganda that is divisive and unhealthy for any community which sometimes creates problems. The internet therefore brings people together but not together per se.”

Fake news is amplified by “echo chambers”, defined as “an environment, especially on a social media site, in which any statement of opinion is likely to be greeted with approval because it will only be read or heard by people who hold similar views” (Flood, 2017). Fake news and misinformation tactics are often used for political propaganda, as the advertisement-driven models and direct engagement via online platforms have been popular for campaigning purposes around the world, including in South Africa (Flood, 2017). Misinformation may further amplify anger and unease in the context of anti-immigrant sentiments. As noted by the editor of *Africa Check*, “You couldn’t believe that somebody would make up such a story just for clicks. It always plays into what is already a quite toxic environment ... They publish stories that they completely make up. They cash in on the newsworthiness of xenophobia; with the tension rising they made up this truly awful story” (Solomon, 2017).

Anti-immigrant attacks aren’t new in South Africa, but the rhetoric and misinformation spread on social media platforms may further amplify anger and unease. For example, fake news reports were identified as the cause of an outbreak of violence against non-nationals in KwaMashu, an area in Kwazulu-Natal province, in May 2017. As cited in the *Huffington Post*, “Foreign-owned shops were reportedly looted overnight amid what police say are false reports that children were being kidnapped for the sale of their body parts. Roads were reportedly blocked and cars were stoned, as foreign-owned shops were torched” (*Huffington Post*, 2017). Online platforms have been observed as being used as propaganda tools to scapegoat non-nationals for social ills.

Digital media has a significant role to play in the portrayal of immigration and difference, which often creates and disseminates populist narratives and fear of difference. As one interlocutor told me,

“It is in my belief that the media is mostly responsible for the South African public’s perception of Somalia and Somalis in South Africa. The generally held view, for instance, that Somalia is basically a terrorist heaven that one can easily spot from the common man’s mention of Al-Shabaab and similar groups can only be explained by the kind of pictures the media portrays of Somalia. The sometimes exaggeration-filled news coverage of the anti-emigrant events or simply xenophobia also contributes to unfriendly attitudes towards the Somalis in South Africa since the moral of the story is mostly that Somalis are taking jobs away from locals.”

The digital design and architecture of online platforms play a role in creating or inhibiting possibilities for social interaction, collective meaning and belonging. The spread of misinformation is particularly rife in the context of digital access trends among low income internet users in the global South, whereby the high cost to connect as opposed to free accessibility of platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook means that few have the means to access online information outside of these applications. Facebook also generally comprises one’s immediate social network, whom one is more likely to trust and where popular information is prioritised by the algorithms to reach the greatest number of viewers, and to stay at the top of newsfeed channels. WhatsApp’s end-to-end encryption, while vital for privacy, makes it nearly impossible to detect the spread of fake news and misinformation. A Somali journalist in South Africa explained to me over email his approach to reporting news and identifying misinformation:

“People post everything now and every day you can see it new issues in Social media especially Facebook, like political affairs, or others it may be fake or true we don’t know but as a Journalist, we have responsibilities to look that and check it carefully, Example in South Africa I Have friends on facebook who lives in different parts of South Africa when Some of them post on facebook Somali guy got shot and killed in his shop, hurt or maybe robbed or maybe some looting happening, but they can’t confirm what they posted on Facebook, if you ask them, they tell you that they just heard from others, so I have to make sure what was happen in that place before I report. The biggest concerns are Fake news in those days and most of the people believe that fake news because they don’t know much about Social Media.”

The spread of rumours on digital messaging platforms has been reported to have led to incidences of violence and political fear mongering in India, Brazil and Kenya. As reported in the Guardian, “The sense that news is being provided in secret by a friend – who got it from their friend, who claims to have got it from their friend, who claims to be in the know – is part

of the appeal and only adds to the credibility of rumours” (Waterson, 2018). Indeed, “The people at risk [of being in a political echo chamber] are those who depend on only a single medium for political news” (Oxford University, 2018).

Social media forums such as Facebook serve as useful purpose for sharing community information but also often become filled with hateful speech, rumour mongering and negativity which may spread through “emotional contagion” (Ferrara & Yang, 2015). This is amplified in the context of the global digital media landscape which often takes on a sensationalist tone to encourage clicks that stimulate advertising models, to spread news and information. As researcher Lisa-Maria Neudert notes, the “ability to have mass distribution at extremely low cost enables propaganda at an entirely different scale, one we’ve never seen before ... And it uses all of the information that we as users are consciously and unconsciously providing, to produce individualised propaganda ... Social media has shifted the capability of designing propaganda to regular users ... So it’s no longer something that is created by big companies or governments – now the everyday lay person can make a propaganda campaign or a disinformation site or create a bot army” (Ingram, 2018). Abdulahi Qorshe summed up the positives and negatives of internet use. From his perspective:

“When used for the right reasons and in the right way – meaning responsibly and out of genuine need – the internet offers an opportunity to connect with many people around the globe and learn new things, get access to valuable information or even share your own whether its ideas, news or knowledge. It’s also a good platform for promoting business since many in your area can find out what products are on offer for instance which they would not otherwise find out that easily. Fake news, the spread of divisive ideas and rhetoric, and the amount of time people spend on it without doing anything beneficial are also some of the negatives of the internet or social media.”

#### *Towards Understanding Social Cohesion and Community Responses to Xenophobia*

Xenophobic tendencies feed into the “consciousness of the city” (Lefebvre, 1996:80), which are manifested not only in individuals but in the experience of communities. Diaspora associations play an important role in building social capital and social cohesion both within communities in South Africa and virtually with wider diaspora networks. The International Organization for Migration and the Migration Policy Institute define diaspora as:

“Emigrants and their descendants, who live outside the country of their birth or ancestry, either on a temporary or permanent basis, yet still maintain affective



(emotional) and material ties to their countries of origin” (International Organization of Migration, 2013:22).

Discussions about diaspora tend to be rooted in dispersion of people from a particular “homeland”. The homeland is situated either in the context of a collective desire to return to a national homeland, or the creation of the characteristics of the homeland in diverse locations (Brubaker, 2005, Clifford, 1994). Stuart Hall emphasises that the diaspora experience should be defined by “hybridity”, rather than by essentialised characteristics of identity and nation (Hall, 1990).

Diaspora associations play an important role in creating community bonding and establishing trust. Organisations like the Somali Association of South Africa are critical groups that mediate bonding and bridging social capital, processes of cultural exchange and hybridity. “Bonding social capital” refers to deep trust and frequent interaction between individuals who identify with a *common group*. “Bridging social capital”, refers to trust between the individuals belonging to *different groups*, which facilitates cooperation (Steenkamp, 2009:444). Diaspora organisations bridge formal relationships with other groups including local government, business associations, other civil society organisations serving migrants and refugees, and religious organisations. They are a platform to raise local civic issues of concern and negotiate on common issues of interest to the Somali community in South Africa (Uwimpuhwe & Ruiters, 2018; Brudvig, 2014).

The Somali Association of South Africa partners with many NGOs, the UNHCR, government departments and police services, security companies, municipal and regional initiatives such as the Greater Tygerberg Partnership, researchers, mosques, religious leaders, and researchers (SIHMA, 2018). The association plays an important role in leadership and advocacy for the Somali diaspora in South Africa, and migrants in general. It also participates in entrepreneurial and business skills sharing workshops with a diversity of South Africans to build dialogue and strengthen township economies. One leader of the group named Abdikadir Mohamed became a formative member of the Somali Association of South Africa after being recognised as a leader by the community. He explained, “They look at how other people carry themselves.” Leaders in Somali communities are often chosen based on their perceived wisdom, oratory skills and personal qualities that command respect and authority (Huisman et al, 2011:84). At first Abdikadir claimed that he shied away from leadership, highlighting that, “In a foreign country, you cannot lead the way you want to lead ideally. There are some problems that you just cannot resolve for people. The challenges are many – for instance

much of the community are non-citizens. I am also not a lawyer to be able to fight for rights. I am here to be a voice, to help anyone.”

Diaspora associations also facilitate bonding within the communities which they serve by convening dialogue on community issues and facilitating support to members, particularly new community members through education and legal services. Diaspora associations play an important role in both “language brokering” (Guan, 2017) and “cultural brokering” (Mathews, 2015). They do this by facilitating language translation and supporting migrants to access local information and social services such as legal and health services. As noted in a report by the Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa on *Refugee and Asylum Seeking Representative Structures and their Communities in South Africa*, “Somalis frequently rely on Somali intermediaries when approaching South African institutions due to distrust, language barriers, and fear of discrimination” (SIHMA, 2018:37).

Community leaders are often called upon to mediate conflicts within the community. A system of conflict resolution is reminiscent of fragmented political leadership in Somali, in which case pockets of social hierarchal structures played governance roles. It was explained by Abdikadir that the conflicts are usually about business, such as if there is a suspected low turnover due to theft, but sometimes they are about other issues. A conflict can take up to several weeks to resolve. It involves a recruitment of chosen conflict mediators from the Somali diaspora spanning across South Africa to travel to the city or town where the conflict is taking place. In the process of negotiation, “You have to make them see eye to eye.” Abdikadir explained that one learns how to do this only through experience, so oftentimes the elders of the community are called to assist. In a mentioned case, elders were invited from Johannesburg to Port Elizabeth to assist in negotiating a conflict. It is generally men who are involved in this system, but “women have their own system of elders who sort out conflicts.” As the next chapter will further demonstrate, members of the Somali community also use social media to voice opinions, highlight concerns and engage in dialogue within the community. Public life is based upon community-based citizenship initiatives such as local governance mechanisms to foster community participation and engagement.

### *Heightened Group Consciousness as a Result of Perceived Prejudices*

The importance of bonding social capital and group identity also becomes more salient in the context of institutional and public exclusion and the threat of violence. Snel et al (2016) make use of the term “reactive transnationalism”, a phenomenon that has not been studied extensively. Drawing on their research on migrants in the Netherlands, they highlight, “When

members of ethnic minorities feel rejected by the majority population, they tend to commit themselves more to their own ethnic community and its institutions, varying from migrant organisations and religious institutions to virtual social networks” (Snel et al, 2016:512).

The term “reactive transnationalism” stems from Portes and Rumbaut (2001:148) who coined the notion of “reactive ethnicity”. Reactive ethnicity refers to the heightened group consciousness, ethnic group solidarity and political mobilisation among migrants as a result of perceived prejudices, hostility or social exclusion in the host society. In his research on the electronic communication and oral culture of Somali websites and mailing lists Abdisalam Issa-Salwe (2006) highlights the role of the diaspora in framing the concept of homeland and notions of identity in the context of mobility. He writes,

“Diasporas play important roles in setting the terms of debate around issues of conflict and identity. The concept of homeland is inherent in the diaspora identity and therefore serves as a focal point of diaspora political action and debate ... Diaspora communities have distinctive attitudes towards the homeland. In many cases homeland takes the form of a highly valuable symbolic attachment. As the intrinsic value of territory diminishes, as day-to-day activities focus on the new place of residence, the homeland’s symbolic importance and salience to identity may grow” (Abdisalam Issa-Salwe, 2006:4–5).

Transnational engagements with a global diaspora and leading back to Somalia may be, in part, an outcome of social exclusion in South Africa and the formation of claims to citizenship and belonging in a homeland. Transnational engagement with a diaspora, fostered through digital communications, creates a paradoxical outcome in which “local” social worlds become partially maintained through assimilation with a diaspora of global kin. It also creates the likelihood that social, political and public lives become organised online, a trend that will likely increase with rapid mobility and digitisation.

## **Conclusion**

As this chapter has shown, migration is not a new phenomenon for Somalis. Cape Town’s Somalis note that mobility has always been a way of life – based on historically nomadic lifestyles in which movement takes place within dense kin and clan networks (Huisman et al, 2011:26). Mobility is socially and culturally engrained, and is expressed by use of the term *buufis*, which is used to express a longing to move (Jinnah, 2012:1). However, the desire to move, associated with the notion of *buufis*, often fails to deliver the expectations of better

fortune. This chapter has situated Somali experiences in South Africa in the context of local and global political trends towards anti-immigration that have limited their current and onward mobility.

South Africa's 2017 revised migration policy introduces greater securitisation of migration and is based on the rhetoric of border protection and temporary migration. This stems from long-standing inadequacies in South Africa's administrative processing of refugees, which has led many Somali migrants to live in "temporary status" for years, in limbo between states and with limited access to citizenship rights. One Somali man that I got to know through my fieldwork in Bellville came to South Africa over ten years ago as a refugee. After five years of living and working in South Africa, he was legally entitled to permanent residency rights. He claimed, "I tried, over and over again, but the process does not move forward. I applied for a hearing with the Standing Committee, but there is no one to ask or blame, the process is stagnant. We have rights, but there is no one to help enforce them."

Crippling bureaucracy, the closure of critically located refugee reception offices – compounded by the detention, deportation and criminalisation of non-nationals, and by the propagation of public xenophobic perspectives through the media – has instigated a discourse of "insiders" and "outsiders". Once granted refugee status, Somali refugees, and shopkeepers in particular, are targets of violence and harassment. The Somali Community Board of South Africa reported that, "Every second day of late, we are experiencing multiple deaths in a single night" (Whittles, 2017). Attacks against Somali shopkeepers have led to a collective memory and ongoing experience of violence within the community.

This chapter has demonstrated the extent to which experiences of social, political and legal limbo have perpetuated a state of "temporariness" for Somalis in South Africa. Due to this experience of being in-between states, and in anticipation of a future that is neither "here nor there", Somali migrants have cultivated a strong sense of transnational belonging. Transnational belonging manifests through histories of mobility and networking with a global Somali diaspora via the internet. Somalis' desire to migrate onwards from South Africa may be driven by their social exclusion and limited access to rights in South Africa, as well as social obligations to a transnationally dispersed family and social community.

As the next chapter will show in further detail, a history of Somali mobility, mass migration and transnational diaspora engagements has led many Somalis to associate with a shared Somali identity via digital technologies, physical and virtual news travelling, and transnational networks of social capital. Somali migrants in Cape Town use digital technologies primarily to

maintain personal networks and relationships with globally dispersed family and friends. Digital technologies such as social media facilitate living in “two worlds” through the virtual potential of instantaneous access to mechanisms for inclusion in both the “social” and the “political”, both of which are significant to understanding personhood and belonging. In this context, I question how new shared cultural and gendered practices and identities emerge when living virtually in-between places and states. In many ways, the rise of online social networks and information capital have taken off among Somali migrants because of Somalis’ tremendous social organising power in the absence of formal institutions, limited assimilation in host countries and resilience of social and cultural norms in the context of vastly integrated transnational diaspora networks. Such networks are important to sustaining Somali migrants’ social, economic and political lives. The next chapter will explore the role of the internet and social media in facilitating various (im)mobilities, and mediating gendered identity and belonging in the context of Somali mobility and transnationalism.

## Chapter 5: Digitally-Mediated Lives of Somali Migrants in Cape Town

In Chapter Four, I argued and sought to substantiate that institutional barriers often limit migrants' access to rights. These complexify their experiences of integrating and belonging. Somali migrants in South Africa face various layers of (im)mobility including administrative struggles in accessing rights. They are often stigmatised and labelled as "foreigner" and experience everyday violence perpetrated by South African nationals who feel inconvenienced by their presence and activities. As a counter-reaction to layers of systemic exclusion, many Somali migrants in Cape Town have gathered in Bellville as a place of economic resilience, physical safety and social integration and belonging. The Somali Association of South Africa estimates that at least 15,000 Somalis reside in Cape Town, and many Somali reside or have resided in Bellville at some point in time. Somali migrants continue to live in other areas of Cape Town – however, Bellville is considered to be a place of community where Somalis gather for business and trading, as well as for relaxing and catching up with friends and family over coffee, a meal, prayers or a soccer game. For many Somali migrants, Bellville has become a home away from home. It is a central node in Somali transnational life, associated with other places such as Mayfair in Johannesburg, Eastleigh in Nairobi and Cedar-Riverside in Minneapolis. Social life in Bellville is characterised by mobility, with the internet playing a role in navigating mobility and belonging. This is evident when visiting Bellville, as there are several internet cafes and international call centres with signs indicating "cheap rates to Somalia". Internet kiosk shops are often overflowing with groups of men hanging out drinking coffee and chatting in the pavements adjacent to the shops, some with mobile phones in hand.

This chapter demonstrates the role of digital technologies, including the internet and social media, in the lives of mobile Somali in and around Bellville, Cape Town. ICTs and internet connectivity assist Somali migrants to maintain social, family and business networks from afar, and to create new networks. This invites the potential to live virtually "in-between" and across localities. Indeed, ICTs create new frontier spaces for the navigation of space and belonging, throwing aside the distinctive of paradoxes of being online and offline, here and there; an insider and an outsider; and demonstrating the complex and nuanced reality of interconnections, interdependence and conviviality (Nyamnjoh & Brudvig, 2016).

This chapter illuminates the ways in which virtual accessibility creates new forms of social, cultural and political engagement. This has enabled Somalis to maintain social and cultural institutions related to kin and community, and to actively negotiate what it means to be Somali today. Participation in social life online is representative of new forms of active citizenship and global belonging outside of the parameters of the traditional nation-state. The "nation"

continues to be salient as a category of belonging in the context of transnational mobility. National identity is evoked through online and virtual mediums, leading to new forms of “everyday nationalism” that may transcend physical “nation spaces.” As such, traditional migration discourses on “integration” may be ill-fitted to developing the conditions for multiculturalism and conviviality. New “digital diasporas” (Brinkerhoff, 2009) formed as a response to (im)mobility and in conversation with new technologies “interrupt cultural narratives of colonial hegemony or national singularity ... to irreversibly transform world politics and imaginaries of nationhood” (Werbner & Fumanti, 2012:151).

This chapter also addresses the ways in which power is exercised online, as well as the design of digital infrastructures which fuel national identity over frontier-ness. This chapter considers how social media platforms facilitate mechanisms of social control based on those who claim authority and hierarchy over others, and their influence on cultural belonging. It explores this topic through analysis of gender norms on and through the internet. Gender is a prominent theme to explore in the context of both technology and (im)mobility, as traditional gender roles and household and community power dynamics come under flux when “traditional” understandings of place, and affiliated notions of belonging, are disrupted. Furthermore, the internet and social media are powerful tools through which gender norms are both reproduced and contested, as well as ascribed onto and within the body. Technology is, therefore, an important field through which to analyse the social reproduction of gender. Technology and new media are platforms where traditional power is contested and also reinforced – digital technologies are used to reign in the status quo, but they also offer individuals a means through which to resist or circumnavigate traditional gender norms.

In light of the above challenges, this chapter looks at how online (im)mobilities – including closeness and distance – are managed deliberately through the active agency of individuals, and for what purposes. While most studies about mobility and migration focus on citizenship and belonging from a legalistic or deterministic standpoint – solidifying prescribed notions of “Somaliness” or other factors of identity affiliated with nationhood or citizenship – there is a need to dig deeper to understand what it means to navigate, and indeed perform, belonging via gendered technologies of mobility. This chapter argues that digital technologies are culturally constituted frontier spaces through which belonging is navigated and performed.

### **ICTs and New “Imagined Communities”**

It is only in relatively recent history that citizens of the same country have had a means of accelerated communicating as a “nation” in a manner that compresses time and space in

significant ways. The ability to communicate across regional and sub-regional dialects and politics through newspapers and print media, and later through ICTs and new media, has facilitated the formation of new national identities, what Benedict Anderson refers to as “imagined communities”. As Zeynep Tufekci (2017a) writes,

“People who would never expect to meet in person or to know each other’s name come to think of themselves as part of a group through the shared consumption of mass media like newspapers and via common national institutions and agendas. The shift from face-to-face communities to communities identified with cities, nation-states, and now a globalised world order is a profound transition in human history” (Tufekci, 2017:4–5).

Just as the printing press was instrumental to the rise of shared national consciousness through the “convergence of capitalism and print technology” (Anderson, 1983:58) and the creation of new publics through readership, the mass uptake of social media and new vernaculars and behaviours associated with the internet have too created “unified fields of exchange and communication” (Anderson, 1983:56). ICTs play an important role in the public sphere. Indeed, “The twenty-first-century public sphere is digitally networked and includes mass media and public spaces, such as the squares and parks ... as well as new digital media” (Tufekci, 2017:6). Tufekci refers to the “digitally networked public sphere” as a complex and dynamic intersection of both online and offline publics that are also profoundly transnational (ibid). Engagements with digital and social media intersect with offline lives as people negotiate personal identity, public knowledge and current events on and through the internet. Thus, closure of the online–offline dichotomy, and its interconnections in everyday life, has become a significant factor influencing shared identity and group belonging.

### **Somali “Imagined Community”, Family and Cultural Heritage through the Internet**

Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) demonstrates how the digital printing press and newspaper have made it possible for people to relate to and understand themselves as part of the modern nation state (Anderson, 1983). In the context of digital media and virtual worlds, people now have “not one but many worlds in which to live” (Castronova, 2005:70), throwing aside geography as a marker of identity. Yet national identity, linked to particular places such as Somalia, remains a salient marker of identity and belonging. Online content is an important factor influencing the Somali transnational family, as it is used to socialise youth to Somali culture, and create a sense of “being Somali” and belonging to a common homeland. Research by Houssein (2013) on media use by Somalis living in Canada confirms that Somali



parents strive to “transmit a cultural identity” through media channels to their children who were born or raised outside of Somalia (Houssein, 2013:98).

As Abdikadir, head of the Somali Association of South Africa in the Western Cape, explained, “The internet gives youth a platform to build relationships, access to news and information from home, family connection. You know, with the internet kids are learning about traditional dance and song.” An example was provided whereby families in Cape Town tuned into Somali national day in Minneapolis via a Facebook Live with Somali youth who were born in the United States to parents of first-generation immigrants. This was confirmed by Yasin, a Somali activist who runs a research consulting business focused on development and security issues in East Africa and the Horn of Africa. He elaborated,

“In terms of culture, most of the diaspora, especially those who have either been born in the west or those who have not lived in Somalia pre-civil war use YouTube a lot to understand and get a glimpse of the Somalia our parents talk about and how different Somali culture then was to now. Also, sites such as YouTube has [sic] tons of old traditional Somali songs, even those that were used as a form of resistance against the colonial powers and later the dictatorial government of Siad Barre.”

Abdulahi Qorshe, a Somali journalist living in South Africa documents public affairs and experiences of Somalis in the country which is broadcasted on his YouTube channel called Somsa24. The channel includes videos, stories and coverage of political and social events like important meetings with South African officials and civil society, visits from prominent Somali leaders and speakers, interviews with Somali shopkeepers, entrepreneurs and Uber drivers, graduations, weddings and celebrations, among other important events. Another young man named Ibrahim who was an enthusiastic student in my English teaching class and who moved on his own to South Africa at the age of 22 asked me if he could film our lessons, stating, “I want to have the memory when I return to Somalia, or wherever..”. Video streaming platforms such as YouTube and Facebook Live are used strategically to bridge common understanding of culture and heritage. While fundamentally transnational in nature, this practice is also situated in the desire for a rooting of identity in shared Somali heritage and a history of belonging. As Issa-Salwe notes,

“The advent of the Somali crisis coincides with the booming of global communication, especially with the introduction of the internet. The new technology has added a new dimension to the pattern of communication of Somali diaspora and how they perceive themselves in the world” (Issa-Salwe, 2006:2).

As Abdulahi Qorshe explained, “Somali diaspora are everywhere today but they are still connected to one another because of the internet and social media is like we live in same house but we can’t touch one another”. This has also facilitated a sense of transnational solidarity. As explained by Mohamed, a Somali activist who has lived and studied in the United States, Europe and East Africa noted that,

“I think internet has played a crucial role in connecting the diaspora to Somalia. This is especially true when it comes to relief aid and other advocacy efforts. For example during the recent droughts, we saw various diaspora youth led initiative including *Caawi Walaal*, two Somali youth from Minneapolis raising tens of thousands of dollars through online fundraising efforts with Somalis from all over the globe contributing.”

While providing a means for understanding Somali culture, the internet is also used by Somali migrants as a way to learn about South African and other cultures. As Ayan – a Kenyan-born Somali woman whose networks expand from Ethiopia, the homeland of her father; to Somalia, the homeland of her mother and husband; to Kenya, where she grew up and left around 2011; to various localities in America and Europe, where her extended family now live; and to South Africa, where she now lives with her husband – explained, “Internet is good for entertainment and watching movies, it’s an important part of learning new cultures”. She told me that, “When you go to a new place you have to learn as much as possible and be like the people. When asked if the internet brings people in South Africa closer together or further apart, she suggested, “Maybe if there was a platform where South Africans and foreigners had the opportunity to communicate, like if they were on a WhatsApp group together, they would be able to communicate and learn about each other, but currently there’s no way to do this.”

Experiences of migration and mobility are often characterised by personal transitions, including navigating identity and re-creating oneself. This may lead individuals to invest in preserving their identities, fervently recreating familiar lifestyles by guarding ethnic and religious identity, often in isolation from local society. In parallel processes of socialisation, individuals assimilate local customs and develop emerging and fluid multicultural identities (Huisman et al, 2011:83). The role of community to individuals during periods of cultural transitions is of great significance, as it offers the promise of belonging. Feeling a sense of belonging is important not only for safety and comfort, but in terms of people’s interrelatedness and willingness to provide hospitality and generosity. A community’s well-being, the quality of relationships and cohesion that exists, depends on social capital, referring to social networks based on reciprocity and mutual trust (Putnam, 1993).

A Somali woman named Hodan Nalayeh, who left Somalia over thirty years ago at the age of eight with her family to live in Canada, started the first English television show and YouTube channel for the Somali diaspora, called IntegrationTV. Founded in 2014, IntegrationTV has the aim of “Uplifting & Inspiring Somali Stories! Connecting Somalis worldwide. Changing our narrative.” Independent media such as this channel work to bridge distance and create community. As cited on the channel, “To integrate means to take the best of both worlds and create a new foundation for success.” Online media, such as this YouTube channel, provide a means of social positioning and inter-subjective belonging, as Somalis and locals alike understand their own mobility and transnational identity via shared or visible experiences of others with whom they may share other common experiences and markers of identity.

### **ICTs Encourage “Bonding” and “Bridging” Social Capital**

ICTs are significant to the social engineering of everyday life, encouraging both “bonding” and “bridging” social capital among Somali migrants, including across regional or clan differences. Despite Somali clan identities and notion of the “other”, this “other” is still considered an “insider”. Channels of social capital enacted through ICTs are foundational to achieving conviviality in Bellville. Digital platforms create a site for cultivating social capital for a diversity of Somali migrants in Bellville – noting that social capital is not a given from simply “being here or there”. Social capital is developed based on shared sentiment of belongings which may be described as, “To be welcome, even if we are strangers. As if we came to the right place and are affirmed for that choice” (Block, 2009:3). Community and conviviality emerge in Bellville due to the dynamics of social capital and forms of local governance that encourage notions of inclusion and belonging. The social fabric of community in Bellville is shaped by a shift in discourse away from social boundaries, and social cohesion emerges in the frequent interplay between dynamics of group-autonomy on the one hand and an interdependent communalism of groups on the other hand, as characteristics of social capital. Community is also deeply rooted to the particular dynamics of space, place and belonging in Bellville.

Digital technology has supported Somali migrants significantly, particularly by enhancing entrepreneurial traits, such as the ability to cope with risk and uncertainty, creativity in problem solving and collaborative efficiency in the use of community resources (Huisman et al, 2011:96). ICTs assist Somali migrants to form relations both within and across borders, back to Somalia and with Somalis around the world. One Somali woman named Sahra who moved to Cape Town from Mogadishu for her postgraduate studies recounted when she first used the internet in Somalia. When she was fourteen years, she created an account with MSN

messenger, a popular chat application in the 1990s, which she used to communicate with her relatives in Canada. Another Somali businessman based in Bellville named Abshir, who has several companies including an accounting firm and a marketing company, remarked that he spends much of the day with his children on Skype, although they are in Somalia. "I speak to them in the morning and I tell them to eat their breakfast!" He explained how important technology is to his family, "I have siblings in Germany, Norway, France, Canada, Uganda and we have monthly family meetings on Skype where we discuss family issues." At the same time, he said that technology is breaking up families. "We used to play, wrestle around and spend time with each other, now people are just on their phones on their own."

### **Expectations of Future Mobility Help Shape Personal Life Trajectories and Define Deterritorialised Belonging**

Maintaining direct connection with a homeland is associated with a feeling of longing for a "home" that is situated elsewhere. For Bellville's Somalis "home" speaks to nostalgia and desire to remain connected to a certain past (Dewoo, 2016). As Benedict Anderson highlights, migrants who are "politically marginalised and economically subordinated in the metropolises where nonetheless they try their best to remain, for a hundred practical reasons, their emotional life and political psychology often remains nostalgically orientated towards a heimat (home) which, thanks to capitalism and late-century technologies, retains a powerful daily grip over them" (Anderson, 1992:9).

In her book on the comparative experiences of Somali migrants in Minnesota, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates, Cawo Abdi (2015) highlights that the discontent of Somalis with life in South Africa may be intensified by the imagination of what life would be like in Europe or North America. Indeed, this may be fuelled by the "desire of many Somalis in South Africa to further migrate" (Abdi, 2015:4). Gastrow and Amit (2015) reiterate that many Somalis "anticipate leaving South Africa to return to Somalia or to settle in a third country" (2015:167). This anticipation for onward mobility creates a paradoxical outcome, in which "local" social worlds are partially defined by and maintained through assimilation with the Somali diaspora, including kin around the world. Somalis' transnational belonging is based on a "nostalgia for the future" (Piot, 2010), as personal life trajectories are conceived with the expectation of imminent or future mobility. Cawo Abdi explains, "How the desired destination is imagined in transnational lives is ... crucial to how migration is experienced by those who successfully manage to migrate" (Abdi, 2015:12). This evokes Appadurai's notion of ethnoscaping, which he describes as the "landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live ... as more persons and groups deal with the realities of having to move or the fantasies of

wanting to move” (Appadurai, 1996:297). Ethnoscapes are influenced by, and entangled in, technoscapes, mediascapes and finscapes (ibid) which influence our “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai, 2004). The circulation of capital through remittances, mobile money and networked economies, combined with access to the internet and the circulation of information on social media, create the conditions for living on and through networked social worlds.

### **The Internet as an Extension of the Gendered Public Sphere**

Migrant groups, including Somalis in Cape Town, are highly organised around an ethics of care and obligation to their own community and transnational families. As Cawo Abdi writes, “Having family, friends or even co-ethnics in a new place softens the initial shock, alienation and lack of resources many newcomers experience” (Abdi C, 2015:25). The networked conviviality and interdependency of the Somali diaspora in Cape Town is apparent when visiting the Bellville central business district, where the central Durban Road’s outdoor public space is frequented by shopkeepers and shop owners, customers and people hanging out around shops. Groups of Somali men make up the majority of people frequenting public space on Durban Road, a main corridor running through the central business district and leading up to the train station. Walking there on any given day you will find men hanging out in large groups chatting or drinking coffee and watching the news or soccer at the various coffee shops and internet cafes that line the streets and the top floors of shopping and residential plazas.

The separation of people and space is hard to maintain in Bellville, as the streets are the heart of living – a critical space where everyday life unfolds (Jinnah, 2012). This trend of congregation enables sharing of news and forms a sense of public community as people talk about the unfolding of history in Somalia, their place in it, and their contribution to the future from exile (Farah, 2000). There are also often groups of men loading or off-loading armfuls of merchandise from bakkies and trucks into warehouses and shops. There are many Somali-owned wholesale shops in the Bellville central business district, which is a popular warehousing site where retail stock is collected to supply migrant-owned shops, such as *spaza* shops, throughout the districts surrounding Cape Town. Bellville is clearly a place of business, active networking and viral communication. Interpersonal relationships – whether between “insiders” or “intimate strangers” (Nyamnjoh, 2010) – forms the basis of conviviality in Bellville (Brudvig, 2014).

As a public space, the Bellville central business district is frequented largely by Somali men. While the conviviality among men was very apparent to me in my participant observation in Bellville, I was curious about the networked conviviality of Somali women and, in particular,

the role of technology in creating public spaces for interaction and networking women in the absence of time, mobility or opportunity to hang out and conduct business in public spaces. The next sections of this chapter will explore this topic further.

### **Women's Voices and Perspectives are Often Absent**

Much of the research and media attention on Somali migration in South Africa has focused on access to legal rights and justice, xenophobia and community peace building. While these issues are of pressing and immediate concern, women's voices and perspectives are often absent. Several academic studies have focused specifically on Somali women's experiences, including research by Cawo Abdi, Zaheera Jinnah, Nereida Ripero-Muñiz, Mulki Al-Sharmani, Helen Horst and Giulia Liberatore, whose research unpacks the complexities surrounding gendered Somali identity in the context of migration and women's diaspora lives in South Africa, Kenya, Egypt, Finland, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom and the United States, as well as their transnational belonging.

Alison Gerard highlights that, "Women's irregular migration generally, and asylum seeking specifically, have historically been regarded as associational. As a result ... investigations ... and all the politics and policies ... have overwhelmingly relied on the narratives of men" (Gerard, 2014:xiv). As Mundell and Carone (2016) reiterate, "Migrant voices are missing not only from scholarship but also from public debate" (Mundell and Carone, 2016:495). Amplifying diverse voices, including women's voices, is critical to understanding social dynamics towards building a cosmopolitan, resilient and more gender equitable society.

As Ripero-Muñiz writes, "Women's role in constructing and transforming a collective identity shouldn't be underestimated as it becomes crucial in transmitting and transforming cultural, religious and gender practices that contribute to the formation of a strong collective identity" (Ripero-Muñiz, 2015:14). This is important because, as Yuval-Davis says, "It is not just the exchange of women but the control of them (or their subordination) which is so often at the base of the social order" (Yuval-Davis, 1997:13). Indeed, as Cawo Abdi notes of Somalis in the United States, "The key to Somalis' sense of alienation is articulated through gender-norm disruptions" which is seen as "dismantling the family, creating gender conflicts and leading to disorientation" (Abdi, 2015:8).

Lakshmi Lingam has pointed out that the history of media innovations has always run parallel to "moral panics" about the role of women in society, and including contestations about what it means to be a "good" and "bad" woman (IT for Change and TATA Institute of Social

Sciences, 2018). This also encompasses the question of control over women's bodies, and access to information and expression. In her book *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*, Lila Abu Lughod (2005) argues that cultural moralities and power are transmitted through new media. She writes,

"The hegemonic or ideological – and thus power-related – nature of mass-mediated cultural texts in the service of national, class or commercial projects is undeniable. This, in turn, should lead us to think about the ways that aspects of what we used to think of as local culture, such as moral values about the proper age of marriage or the propriety of women's education, are themselves not neutral features to be interpreted but the sometimes contested result of other, more local, projects of power that are worth analyzing" (Abu Lughod, 2005:41–2).

### **ICTs Constitute a Mechanism to Empower Women and to Enhance their Social Status via Access to Information**

The possibilities presented by digital technology, and the internet in particular can provide a means for challenging the gender norms and expectations of women. For Ayan, – a Kenyan-born Somali woman who, since moving to South Africa, has worked and collaborated as a translator, community builder and activist for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the Somali Women's Organisation and the Agency for Refugee Education, Skills Training & Advocacy – the internet has been important to her own personal growth. She described the ways in which the internet has helped with "expanding your world and knowledge", as well as for finding a job and building a greater degree of economic independence. "You can just use Google to find a job and then see what you like or what fits you", she explained. At the time of the interview, she was using the internet to follow political debates and read news "especially because now is the time of the Kenyan election, so I read the news every day to find out what's happening". In her social work in communities and in her outreach doing Somali–English translations, she has focused specifically on creating channels to communicate issues and concerns for Somali women in their access to health services and educational opportunities for children. Being digitally connected has been important in developing and supporting her leadership role, including her ability to support her community as a key liaison, and to respond to emerging issues of concern. She explained that her true passion is working with women and educating women about their rights and how they can be true to themselves.

Another woman in her late 20s named Zeinab, who moved to Cape Town from Mogadishu for her postgraduate degree at the University of Western Cape in development studies, said that having a cell phone and access to the internet was vital to ensuring her family in Mogadishu that she was safe throughout the day. Another woman voiced similar views, and said that she always checks in with her mother living in Kenya via a WhatsApp message or a call, when she leaves her apartment and returns home when going out in Cape Town. The ability to keep in touch with family and reassure of each other's mutual safety has become particularly important since many family members of Somali migrants in Cape Town have heard media reports of the violence and attacks targeting Somali migrants in South Africa, and allegedly fear for their family members' lives.

#### **Case Study: Somali University Student in Bellville**

Zeinab moved to Cape Town to study because, "I heard that UWC is one of the best universities in Africa so I knew I wanted to go there". She said her father encouraged her to go study outside of Somalia. In Somalia she studied and worked with the International Organization for Migration. She wants to study and then return to Somalia; everyone questions why she would want to do this. In her job in Somalia, she worked with Somalis who were educated in Canada and Finland, who came back to work in Mogadishu and landed great jobs. "They earn much more money than local Somalis," she expressed. She is applying for her Masters degree, and intends to study Somali women and health issues. I asked her what it was like coming to South Africa and living on her own, besides her cousin and some extended family contacts in Cape Town. She explained, "It can be hard because in Somalia I was always surrounded by people and family...But at UWC it's a nice place especially for Muslims, there are places to go pray.. There are people from all over like Malawi and Zimbabwe in my class so I feel like I fit in with them."

Daniel Miller has documented the role of Facebook as a place of socialisation and expression in Trinidad (Miller, 2011). As in Trinidad, Facebook is an important platform of socialisation for Somalis. Several Somali interlocutors voiced that Facebook is popular because it is free to access and it supports Somali language translation as "one of just a few African languages". Indeed, African languages make up just 12% of the languages offered by Facebook. During the time of Ramadan in 2017, several interlocutors explained that, Somalis love Facebook so much that Mark Zuckerberg spent *Iftar* with Somalis in Minneapolis a few weeks ago. I was frequently told that Somalis have an oral tradition "so the internet goes very well with our culture. Somalis love to communicate and speak to each other, we are always on the phone



and communicating. This is why things like skype and voice notes are so popular”. However, “Somali women use chat a LOT – it’s more private than speaking on the phone... You just use your bundles to get on WhatsApp, Facebook or calling people anytime.”

As both social and communicative tools, ICTs constitute a mechanism to overcome experiences of distance posed by mobility, immobility and marginality (Nyamnjoh & Brudvig, 2016). ICTs may have the potential to expand individual life choices and capabilities (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2014). Access and meaningful use of ICTs gives rise to the possibilities to empower women to enhance their own social status via access to information, communication channels and associational networks. This can provide an opportunity for women to negotiate their social positioning and circumvent traditional social expectations of women.



### Online Communications are Autobiographical

Online communications are an important means of self-expression. Social media profiles are autobiographical, and a combination of both the “public” and “private” selves is presented in the public domain. Social media has brought autobiography and, indeed, self-representation, into popular culture, allowing for self-construction through digital capabilities. This gives women a voice and platform to represent themselves outside of male figures and male dominated spaces, which, in turn, change the narrative, build self-confidence and create new opportunities for social engagement. As Donna Haraway writes, communications technologies

are “crucial tools recrafting our bodies. These tools embody and enforce new social relations for women worldwide” (Haraway, 1984:302). One woman whom I became friends with over the course of this research enjoys posting selfies and is constantly responded to with overwhelmingly positive reinforcement including emoji smiles, hearts and words of appreciation via comments posted from friends and family around the world. For women who do use the internet, it can provide an important space to develop an independent voice and identity, and therefore confidence and self-worth. For example, posting photos of visiting beautiful locations in Cape Town or at social gatherings invites many positive comments from friends and family around the world, and an affirmation of a sense of self independent of family relationships. Social media may also be used to positively build friendships and social networks of women, which can lead one to feel a sense of inclusion driven by bonding social capital and public affirmation of such. Based on my observations, Somali women tend to post photos of themselves with friends or just of friends with captions praising each other as “queens”. I was delighted to be included in such a post, with my Somali friend named Hodor posting a photo from our outing with the caption:

“My lovely queens  them”.

These posts are often responded to with the phrase *Masha Allah*, an Arabic phrase that means "God has willed" or "as God willing", which is used to express joy, appreciation, praise or thankfulness for a person or event that was mentioned. Another young man, with whom I interacted throughout the research, posted a photo of his friend who had just arrived in Bellville from Somalia, seemingly as a way of “introducing” him to what would become their shared online and social community. This introduction was met with warm welcome, and indeed, new social connections. Many wished him *Masha Allah* and sent blessings to welcome him. According to Miller and Venkatraman (2018) some scholars have argued that “new media may enhance the private sphere and the core group rather than being necessarily expansive (e.g., Broadbent, 2011; Hampton, Sessions, & Her, 2011; Ling, Bjelland, Sundsøy, & Campbell, 2014), while others argue for a more expansive effect increasing the core group of people that one routinely interacts with (Schrock, 2016)” (Miller and Venkatraman, 2018:2). Both of these cases apply in the context of Somali transnational networks, as family and kinship networks are both enhanced and expanded, and new migrants to South Africa, particularly those who share a clan, are included. This increases the core group of people that Somali migrants may routinely interact with in Cape Town.

## **The Spatial Self: A Location Marker in Communal Space and Shared History**

Selfies and “checking in” on social media provide a means of “placing” oneself in the world. This spatial self is a “theoretical framework that explores the presentation of the self, based on geographic traces of physical activity” (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2014:5). It refers “to a variety of instances (both online and offline) where individuals document, archive, and display their experience and/or mobility within space and place in order to represent or perform aspects of their identity to others” (ibid). The spatial self is a way of actively marking location as a modality of “self-presentation” and participating in communal space and shared history. Localisation is important, despite interactions being characterised as taking place in hybrid and transnational spaces of flows and networks. There continues to be great symbolism in localities attached to these environments, as they become markers and vehicles for expressing identities. This is characteristic of the observation that immigrants are increasingly best understood as “transmigrants”, defined as: “Immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state” (Glick Shiller et al, 1995:48). Further,

“They are not sojourners because they settle and become incorporated in the economy and political institutions, localities and patterns of daily life of the country in which they reside. However, at the very same time, they are engaged elsewhere in the sense that they maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated” (ibid).

“Placemaking” forms an important part of negotiating belonging in South Africa by connecting with transnational networks of social capital and the local Somali community in South Africa. It is also important to maintaining one’s identity, image and reputation across geographies and with global kin and, indeed, constructing and reconstituting “their simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society” (Glick Shiller et al, 1995:48). Indeed, the performance of identity in online spaces is an important influence on personal trajectories and friendship networks, as “local” social worlds become partially maintained through assimilation with a diaspora of global kin (Brudvig, 2016).

## **Making a Place in the Space of Transnational Networks Enhances People’s “Capacity to Aspire”**

A study of Facebook use among Somali youth found that Somali youth use Facebook for virtual companionship and to “escape from the worries of life” (Dhaha & Igale, 2013). Indeed,

from my observations it seems to be a tool which enhances people's "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2004), or to contest the often taken-for-granted narratives and ideas about cultural capacity. For example, for Hassan, the young Somali man who sells snacks, sweets and cold drinks at a small stall on Kruskal Avenue in Bellville nearby to both the train station and the office of the Somali Association of South Africa, and with whom I became friends, posted a photo of himself noting that he would like to become a lawyer, and that he was on his way towards this dream. He posted photos of himself with his face painted with the Somali flag, portraying a sense of hope and aspiration for his country and his own future in it. This is related to the idea suggested by Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008) that Facebook users construct and assert an identity based on their "hoped-for possible self" – defined as, "socially desirable identities an individual would like to establish and believe they can be established given the right conditions" (Zhao et al., 2008:1819). Identities are negotiated, produced and reproduced online. Identity is, indeed, based on a co-mingling of lived experiences in the host country and affiliations with social networks and home village associations (Nyamnjoh, 2014). As Somali writer Najma Sharif describes, "For younger generations, we find that sense of belonging and cultural identity on social media." She writes further, "

"For those of us who grew up online, in countries outside of Somalia, the internet is as much a part of our culture as our ethnic identity. On Vine, you can find Somalis connecting to each other with tags like #SomaliVine. On Twitter and Tumblr, all one has to do is look through the tags #Somali and #Somalia to see Somalis posting news, bickering about politics, and telling jokes. Sometimes, the content doesn't even have anything to do with Somalia; it's just a way of saying, 'We're here, and so are you.' One of the most popular online spaces for younger Somalis is Snapchat, where accounts like SomaliTV and MY252 show Somalis from around the world asking and answering each others' [sic] questions, telling stories, and showing off their daily lives. Flipping through the videos, you can hear different dialects, see different fashion choices, and glimpse into the drastically different lifestyles of Somalis in different cities. We all live different lives, and the videos offer a glimpse into what life would've been if our parents had fled to a different country" (Sharif, 2016).

The internet and its online platforms are a place of aspiration, humour, mutual exchange and upliftment, but it can also become a place of judgement, gossip and rumour. This was clear in the post by Hodor, the woman mentioned above (who enjoys posting selfies). She indiscreetly posted on Facebook: "When you are busy with my life, you will forget yours", to which her friend replied, "So true girlfriend, some people are not owning their lives because they are busy with other people's lives." Information and the exchange of personal information –

whether through pleasantries and status updates, personal announcements, or longer conversations, “informing” and “being informed” – are a source of capital, relatable to Mauss’s gift exchange, in which the exchange of information is based on reciprocity and personal status. Information exchange (as with gift-giving) is based on a mutual interdependence between giver and receiver and, according to Mauss, gifting (or the sharing of information) creates social bonds based on the expectation of reciprocity (Mauss, 1990).

Interactions on social media are related to Mauss’s notion of gift giving, such that information exchange is based on the inherent notions of inter-subjectivity, reciprocity and social obligation. As Mary Douglas notes in her Forward to Mauss’s, *The Gift*,

“Gifts are given in a context of public drama, with nothing secret about them. In being more directly cued to public esteem, the distribution of honour, and the sanctions of religion, the gift economy is more visible than the market. Just by being visible, the resultant distribution of goods and services is more readily subject to public scrutiny and judgements of fairness than are the results of market exchange. In operating a gift system a people are more aware of what they are doing, as shown by the sacralization of their institutions of giving” (Mauss, 1990:xvii).

Issa-Salwe argues that Somali mailing lists reflect, “the traditional way of treating information as a commodity. Somalis say, ‘*warbaa ugu gaaja wayn*’ (information hunger is the worst hunger). This makes one a potential source of precarious news and, therefore, a good ‘handler’” (Issa-Salwe, 2008:65). The exchange of information may create solidarity and social cohesion, but it may also be based on the need to inform, as well as the desire to collect information. This can lead to the feeling of having too much communication and a lack of privacy, and particularly so in a small, connected community.

For example, Sahra, a 28 year old woman who moved to Cape Town from Mogadishu to study at university, reported that she used to have a very active Facebook account (more than 1,000 friends) but that she felt overwhelmed with constant friend requests and messages and the need to communicate. She felt that she spent too much time on social media and felt obligated to always respond to messages and share information, particularly being far away in Cape Town. She explained that she would also “over analyse” her digital communications which would take up a lot of head space and time away from studying. She described that in Somalia she used to go to work extra early (at 7 am) just to go on social media. The director of her organisation had to shut down the internet at work because “me and my colleagues were on social media constantly!”

## **Online Moral Policing has a Notable Impact on Women**

Another Somali woman named Nahla, whom I interviewed, travelled away from South Africa to meet her family after living away from them for seven years. She came back to Cape Town but planned to move to another city in South Africa for work and personal reasons. Despite only having been back in Cape Town for a few short days, and not having announced her decision to relocate, she quickly learned that “everyone” knew about her plans and personal reasons for relocating. She explained to me, “There is jealousy in this community” and “If you say something before you know it everyone will have heard it and will have an opinion about you.” This feeds into a moral policing which has a notable impact on women, in particular those who have a voice online and offline and exert independence. Her post on social media a few weeks later stated, “Always remember Rumour is carried by haters, spread by fools, accepted by idiots.” Nahla felt as if her personal decisions were under social surveillance, based on information that she had posted online and which others had shared about her within the community as rumours. While some may withdraw from publicly displaying personal information on social media under the judgement of community members, Nahla felt it was her role to share her perspectives, challenge stereotypes and set an example to others based on her own self-presentation.

Rumour is driven by the “desire to belong”. It reflects, as Tufekci notes, “What a person perceives to be the views of the majority” but it “is also used by those in power to control... especially if it is paired with heavy punishments for the visible troublemakers who might set a different example to follow” (Tufekci, 2017a:25). Digital media spurs collective action which can be beneficial in terms of identifying and acting on shared feelings and beliefs, but it can also be alienating as a “mechanism of control” used to create submission. This may be particularly relevant in the context of social governance, clan membership and implicit social obligations associated with group membership.

## **Rumour Driven by Online Echo Chambers**

Digital technologies create multiple channels for people to find others with similar views, desires, or relevant information, which can lead to feelings of being understood and finding a sense of belonging. However, this can also lead to confirmational bias in which one’s views become stronger because of being affirmed by people with similar views and information that appear in one’s personalised online social network newsfeed. Indeed, online platforms and

algorithms are designed to keep you on their websites, a technical design with profound social ramifications. As Zeynep Tufekci (2017) notes,

“Opportunities to find and make such connections with people based on common interests and viewpoints are thoroughly intertwined with the online architectures of interaction and visibility and the design of online platforms. These factors—the affordances of digital spaces—shape who can find and see whom, and under what conditions; not all platforms create identical environments and opportunities for connection. Rather, online platforms have architectures just as our cities, roads, and buildings do, and those architectures affect how we navigate them” (Tufekci 2017a:10).

Therefore, the platform will continue to show you more and more of the type of information that you like to engage with, and the content itself may be more and more extreme and targeted to the topic of interest to keep you consistently engaged. This “echo chamber” phenomenon has the potential of both promoting – and therefore prioritising – certain types of information over other information or viewpoints, and also inflaming social dialogue around particular information, topics of gossip or specific viewpoints. In the context of social media, it can increase the virality of popular information and misinformation or rumour.

### **Informal Social Governance is an Important Component of Situational Power and Agency**

The implicit and inherited knowledge of informal social governance systems and social norms may be amplified through social media, as online spaces become semi-public platforms where enforcement of norms and order are carried out. Jinnah (2017) highlights from her research with Somali migrants in Johannesburg that,

“For those who have strong clan networks, there are reciprocal duties and obligations attached to membership. Members are expected to remain loyal to the clan and maintain relations within it. There is an implicit understanding that a member will limit socialising outside the clan, will work for, or employ members of their own clan and will not engage in behaviour that is frowned on by clan leaders. For women, this includes chewing kat in public, wearing pants or not covering their heads; for men, it is causing disturbances in public, colluding with non-clan members for business, and not respecting clan members or paying dues to clan leaders” (Jinnah, 2017:891–2).

Somali academic Abdisalam Issa-Salwe (2006) writes in his research on Somali electronic communication through websites and mailing lists, that,

“While the Internet creates a sense of belonging and a sense of sharing for Somali groups, it is also an agent for 'fragmentation', Somali websites tend to depict cherished cultural homogeneity and shared heritage of Islam, they also portray the political and social division of their consciousness” (Issa-Salwe, 2006:285).

Informal social governance organising structures and implicit cultural norms are often replicated online. Local and informal social governance mechanisms, though complex and often difficult to research and fully understand as an “outsider”, are important components to understanding situational power and agency.

### **Technology and Power: Mechanisms of Social Control Perpetuate Online**

Despite the benefits of being both mobile and connected, patriarchy and other forms of social control perpetuate online, often in the advertent attempt to limit women’s mobility. One man named Mustafa, who runs both laundry and internet café businesses in Bellville, spoke of the “dangers” of Facebook. He said that he uses Facebook but proclaimed that it is not a place for a wife, claiming that, “She will get jealous and I will get in trouble when she sees that I am chatting with other people.” This was reiterated by a female interviewee named Aisha who claimed that “Facebook is breaking up marriages.” She explained furthermore that, “Some men may not want their wives to be on the internet reading news, and expanding themselves and their minds – they want to control their wives. Once the woman is online reading news and accessing information about her rights, she is harder to control, maybe she will no longer conform to the typical role that Somali men want their women to be in, taking care of the house and staying at home.” This woman was also keenly aware of online privacy and security, citing for example, that, “They may also use your photo and share it around, or men may take your photo and put it in a new profile, and use it to chat to other men, then they show it to your husband, and he asks, ‘Why are you not happy in this marriage’? He may threaten to marry someone else, so Facebook can ruin your life and your reputation.”

From the Mustafa’s perspective, he was under the impression that Facebook is a means for his wife to have control over him, in terms of observing whom he interacts with on the social platform. He further explained, “You see, it’s is [sic] as if the man has been working so hard the whole day, he is tired, he is sick. Then he comes home very hungry and his wife has not cooked or prepared anything because she has been sitting on the computer and on Facebook



for such a long time ... you see?" Seemingly, his emigration from Somalia caused his marriage to end. Others who were participating in the conversation disagreed strongly, and said it is not right to try and control one's spouse, or their activity online. A married woman named Zeinab entered into the conversation and voiced that she and her husband both use Facebook. "It's his business, I don't mind what he does", she explained.

Zeinab explained, "Some people in the community don't want young people to use technology because they might have access to bad influences or information ... Some men may not want their wives to be on the internet reading news, and expanding themselves and their minds – they want to control their wives. Once the woman is online reading news and accessing information about her rights, she is harder to control, maybe she will no longer conform to the typical role that Somali men want their women to be in, taking care of the house and staying at home." In the context of accessing information about health, Zeinab said that this topic is very culturally embedded and controversial. She explained, "In Somalia there is no access to contraceptive, so many women breastfeed for a long time, then they have children after they stop breastfeeding ... they have a lot of children." She explained that there would be a lot of stigma in accessing sexual and reproductive health information online, as well as mistrust in the information presented on the internet. Individual one-on-one peer mentoring is important in this context, which is part of her work on women's health education in communities.

Digital technologies are an extension of the body, domesticated by individuals, and based on subjective needs and desires (Hawaway, 1984). Through technologies, the body also becomes a part of material culture, thereby making the body subject to intervention (Warnier, 2009). This is particularly so with social media – and Facebook in particular – which extends social surveillance through digital means. Surveillance is at the core of how power works through technologies of visualisation, creating social norms based on dominant perspectives, morality and punishment, and social reproduction.

As much as the internet has been empowering to several women interviewed – enabling them to expand their own life choices and exercise agency over their bodies and decisions – issues raised around women and technology are situated in a context of social anxiety and moral panic around women's public participation both on and through the internet, as well as how women's agency impacts family and gender norms and cultural practices.

## **Remote Romance and Online Availability**

Distance marriages are common among Somali migrants, and the internet was cited as being extremely important to maintain relationships. Once during fieldwork, a question about the meaning of the word "available" came up. Several people with whom I was interacting were unfamiliar with the meaning of this word. After I proceeded to try to explain the meaning of the word "available", Abdiwahib, a business owner in Bellville, explained it in a simple and distinct way, which immediately captured the understanding of the group: "It's like, if I'm not married or dating, then I am available." I could imagine that he might have engaged with this terminology online.

Oftentimes distance marriages are arranged by family members (through an introduction) and then the couple will resort to chatting online to get to know each other. Digital technology plays a central role in navigating intimacy, and the internet and cell phones have made it easier for young Somalis to connect privately without the intervention of family members (Brown, 2014:48). Upon meeting with Hassan one day as I passed by his shop, he pronounced (to my surprise, as it was not mentioned in earlier interactions), that he had gotten married over the previous weekend. Apparently, the marriage (and engagement) was performed over the phone. This is allegedly somewhat common in contemporary Somali culture (Abdi, 2011), perhaps as a way to mediate around the obstacles presented by transnational (im)mobilities.

Abshir, a Somali business owner whose offices are based on the top story of a large office building in Bellville, explained to me that as more Somali men migrate to live and work in other countries, daughters allegedly become a financial liability and so marriages are arranged for financial security (sometimes to cousins or other distant family who are already connected via remittance channels). Another man in his early 30s named Mustafa said that his wife is in Kenya but he plans to bring her to South Africa soon. His wife did not have a father or uncle (who is generally involved in the marriage negotiation), so her older brother was the one to negotiate with on these matters, also over the phone. As described in an article on a Somali blog site, "With increasingly cheap cellular technology combined with a seemingly unending humanitarian crisis in Somali, a growing number of Somalis are how phoning their way down the aisle. All the details of Haret's wedding, including the marriage proposal, the acceptance and even the dowry payment, were done via phone, Haret said, without her knowledge" (Abdi, 2011).

Telephone marriages have emerged as a way for Somalis to work around the realities of (im)mobility, transnational diaspora, the social obligation of kinship and economic insecurity.

One young woman said that the internet is so important to Somali people that some will even skip meals to have extra money to connect. “Some will eat 2 times instead of 3 times to be able to connect – they have to speak to their relatives overseas because they are sending remittances, so it’s worth skipping a meal for the money.” It was explained to me by a Somali man that women are at the mercy of men for financial reasons, and personal freedom is first and foremost dependent upon economic freedom. He expressed his personal view that, “Personal freedom relies on economic freedom. Economic freedom gives people the ability to have a voice and speak out. It’s also important to overcome language barriers and skills barriers in order to have empowerment.” This notion was even reiterated by Foucault who says that political changes that result in the accumulation of power and economic changes that result in the accumulation of capital are mutually dependent (Rabinow:1984:18).

### **“My relationship ended because she was cut off from the internet!”**

Online dating appears to be common amongst both young Somali migrants and divorcees, such as one young man who lamented to me that his recent online relationship ended because “she could not connect to the internet, the place in Somalia was cut off”. Internet shutdowns in Somalia affected everyone I interviewed. Not having access to the internet was cited as being especially difficult when the internet was cut off in Somalia during Eid and families were not able to communicate.

This man had wished to marry, but claimed that “I first need to have enough money.” It was explained to me by Aisha, a Somali woman who has lived in three South African cities and who has been married twice, in both cases to Somali men (her first marriage ended in divorce), that it is very expensive to find a Somali wife in South Africa. She reported that some men allegedly return to Somalia to get married, or have an arranged marriage to facilitate a relationship. She explained, “It’s like supply and demand, when there is scarcity, then the (dowry) price goes up. Marrying a Somali woman in South Africa is very expensive.” A few years later the young man whose online relationship was under stress decided to visit Somalia to get married. He had just been back in South Africa for three months when I went to visit him in his shop in Bellville. He invited me to sit in his shop while he attended to customers, and asked if I had seen his photos on Facebook. I told him that I’d seen photos of him and his friends swimming in the sea and enjoying time in the city of Mogadishu. It had been a while since we had met in person, so I was not sure if these were recent photos, or taken during an earlier visit. He explained that they were recent photos, and, in fact, he got married in Somalia. His wife stayed in Mogadishu to finish her studies. “She is in her final year, so maybe she will come to South Africa afterwards.” Online tools like video chat are useful to maintain long

distance relationships. “It’s like being in the same place but a little bit apart”, he explained. I found it fitting that one of the main goods this man sold in his shop was airtime, with R20 or data bundles up to 1GB being the most popular among customers.

### **Gendered Complexities of Mobility and Cosmopolitanism in Patriarchal Societies: The Geo-Politics of Love and Intimacy**

While online dating and telephone marriages can be a positive force for young Somalis to build romantic and marriage relationships, there are also precarities associated with women’s forced marriage and the intersection of online platforms, polygamy and family life in the context of migration. From the perspective of one Somali woman, many of the Somali women in Bellville live in South Africa because of the popularity of arranged marriages, where all arrangements are conducted between male migrants and family members in Somalia. While this is not the case for all relationships, it is allegedly a complicated issue, which can lead to difficulties and isolation of Somali women once in South Africa. This demonstrates the gendered complexities of mobility and cosmopolitanism in patriarchal societies or where women’s control over their bodies is mediated by various cultural, political and economic factors, including male mobility. I agree with Groes and Fernandez’s argument that studies of mobility and migration must address intimate issues such as love, sex, reproduction, family and obligation – and that cross-border mobility is not always based on “rational choice”, but that “mobility could encompass all sorts of journeys, including those sparked by hopes, obligations, nostalgia, desire, images, symbols, and cultural practice, or enabled by changing technologies, or triggered by broader unforeseeable life trajectories” (Groes & Fernandez, 2018:5). Groes and Fernandez write further,

“In this age of globalisation and transnational encounters, people’s mobility often intersects with intimate issues ... Such intimate issues shape mobility across and between countries, and at the same time, transnational spaces and movements also shape people’s intimate choices.” (Groes & Fernandez, 2018:2).

Mai and King (2009) argue that since studies in migration and mobility focus mainly on economic factors, they fail to capture the intricacies associated with the affective and the emotional, leading to “reductive outcomes”. They argue that migrations and mobilities are rarely motivated exclusively by political and economic factors. As such, such life decisions can be better understood by including personal affective and emotional influences. However, much of the research on mobility and migration overlooks emotional and intimate relationships. Mobility may be based on family obligation, gender inequality and cultural expectations, rather

than being solely a result of political and economic factors or personal choice. Taking an emotive approach in analysis reveals the broader moral economy that shapes women's choices. Beyond that, it is important to problematise the notion of choice as it relates to mobility. As Naila Kabeer (1999) writes,

“Power and dominance can operate through consent and complicity as well as through coercion and conflict ... In other words, in assessing whether or not an achievement embodies meaningful choice, we have to ask ourselves whether other choices were not only materially possible but whether they were *conceived* to be within the realms of possibility” (Kabeer, 1999:441).

Though her views have been controversial and met with significant political backlash, Ayaan Hirsi, a Somali-born Dutch-American activist, feminist, author, scholar and former politician, reflects on her own journey and the adverse gender norms that drove her away from her family. She argues that a “clash of civilisations” determines how cultural norms influence processes of integration and the building of convivial societies. She cites one of the main characteristics of this “clash of civilisation” is the treatment of women, including the control of women's bodies and their life decisions. She cites that, “If a man's women strays [sic] from submission, they damage him: his good name, his authority, the sense that he is loyal and strong and true to his word ... This sense of honour and male entitlement drastically restricts women's choices ... We are bound to obey and bound to chastity and shame ... by the fathers and husbands who are our guardians” (Ali, 2010:15). While this is the opinion of this author and not all of the women or men whom I interacted with during the course of my research, it became clear to me that women continue to bear the burden of family honour, which in turn mediates their status and belonging.

This became apparent with the revelation that several Somali women have allegedly been abandoned by their families and communities due to their contracting HIV from their husband in South Africa. This material is ethically sensitive but important, as it highlights the tensions in travel and mobility and encounters with difference in a manner that challenges Somali sociality and sense of community. Nahla explained, “There are many young Somali men who come here and they have a good time – you can see the ladies standing on the street there in Voortrekker Road. Then there comes a time when they want to marry a Somali woman. It's like the economics of supply and demand, when there is scarcity, then the price goes up. Marrying a Somali woman in South Africa is very expensive. They are also more informed, and Somali men prefer women who are less informed”. Somali women who move to South Africa for arranged marriages with Somali partners often do not speak English and have limited

interaction with public health services or information outside of their husband and immediate network. They may become aware of their HIV status once they fall pregnant and seek maternal health services. In such cases, women are blamed and stigmatised for their HIV status, and are sent back to Somalia where they are excommunicated from their communities, and, allegedly, often unable to access medical treatment due to the limited availability of medicine, and shame surrounding HIV in the country. It was explained to me that in such cases, “women are left to die alone once they are sent back to Somalia with HIV”. As Aisha expressed to me, “Families sending their daughters from Somalia to South Africa for marriage must know the risks then they can make their own decision.” In her community work, she educates Somali women about sex, remarking, “I show them the condom and how to use it with my penis stick. They are always asking me how I know that, I tell them I was married before, and anyways I learned it in school in Kenya.” Aisha wants to address this issue head on. She remarked, “I know what people will call me when I try to address this issue, but I don’t care. I’m going to use Facebook Live to raise awareness”. She recognised that, before doing so, she would need solid evidence to back up the allegations.

The burden of family honour was also reiterated in research by Northcote and Dodson (2015), citing the case of a 26-year old Somali woman in Cape Town who wanted to open a shop to remit money to her family in Somalia. Her husband told her she cannot work outside the home, since she has a small child. In response, the woman sent her young son back to Somalia to live with family while she opened a shop, ignoring the cultural expectations of her. Northcote and Dodson (2015) explain that, “her decision came at a price. Not only was her young child back in Somalia, but her marriage eventually ended over continued disagreements between her and her husband over her decision to work” (Northcote and Dodson, 2015:152). In this context, the internet and social media are places where women’s agency is contested and where women are able to associate freely, claim space, find economic opportunity and have independent voices. In this process, there is also the risk of “false agency” if women are seen to be participating in online public spaces without having personal autonomy about their bodies and decisions, equal opportunity for economic advancement, public leadership and political decision making.

### **Social Media and the “Transnational Imaginary”**

The majority of Somali migrants in South Africa are young men in their twenties and thirties. Some are single and others are married with their wives residing in South Africa, Somalia and/or in Kenya primarily. Somali women also started to move to South Africa independently in the early 2000s with their children (Brown, 2014:9). As a result of the transnational nature

of love and marriage relationships in the context of migration, with partners often living apart, there is the tendency for social media to be a place of anxiety where marriage partners observe people of the opposite sex posting or liking their partners' content or photos. This can lead to social media becoming a site of jealousy and anxiety, especially from afar. In *Return to Cyberia* (2006) Horst and Panagakos call this the "transnational imaginary" that is constructed from being afar and through poor lines of communication, which can lead to anxiety of infidelity and feelings of abandonment (Horst & Panagakos, 2006:111). They question, "What happens to transnational social relations when less is left to the imagination? Does reporting the banal happenings of everyday life create a welcome sense of co-presence or is this constant potential for involvement perceived as surveillance from afar?" (ibid).

As Aisha reiterated to me several times during interviews, "Social media has a big effect on marriage". She spoke from personal experience having divorced and remarried during the time of this research, and continued, "People say things indirectly, or you might notice that your partner has more female friends online ... something can happen and then your friend posts something and it's an indirect communication of their feelings related to what happened between you." Paradoxically, *too much* contact or information can lead to increased feelings of distance or social isolation. For example, Nahla experienced many individuals in the community contacting her to confirm rumours about her, making it apparent that others' desire to be informed of her movements and decisions was based on their jealousy of her, and their need to be informed to disseminate their own views on the subject to enhance their social status. On the other hand, the vibrant social activity on social media necessitates constant connectivity to the extent that being disconnected risks being alienated. "Information and communication technologies are so embedded in daily life for many that their temporary removal causes social dislocation and a perceived breakdown of social networks" (Horst & Panagakos, 2006:112). On the other hand, Nahla told me about an acquaintance who has not phoned his parents in Somalia in his two years since moving to South Africa. Nahla explained, "He says, oh my parents are living in a rural area and don't have internet access, but why can't you just go load airtime and call your parents? People only want to make the effort to communicate when they want something from you."

### **Polygamy, Secret Marriages and Subverting Gendered Social Spaces**

The effects of social media on marriage relationships are heightened in the context of polygamy, which is allegedly practised among some Somali men, though certainly not all. This creates a cause for concern about women and women's rights in societies where polygamy is practised. Brown (2014) describes in her ethnography of Somali women in Bellville, Cape

Town that a dating practice called *shukaansi* has become increasingly prevalent whereby, “there’s little physical contact between the prospective couple, mostly they communicate by talking and sending messages via cell phone. A suitor sends airtime to the lady he is interested in, so that she may contact him. It is implicitly understood that the interaction is to measure suitability as partners in marriage. If there is agreement and understanding between the prospective partners, it would lead to a few dates together and then marriage (Brown 2014:49). Marriage is initiated with formal marriage vows, and the couple is legally married under Islamic law.

This process was described as “secret marriage”, a terminology which was confirmed in Brown’s (2014) research where she highlights that, “A large proportion of *shukaansi nikkah*’s are done in secret as many of the men are already married and have wives in other countries” (ibid). Practices such as *shukaansi* have emerged in the context of migration, often done as a means for women to access economic support, and by quicker means than through a traditional marriage; and by men who are in polygamous relationships. Brown (2014) elaborates further that,

“Women are using traditional norms of marriage to their advantage by choosing to do *shukaansi*. In the short term it is a survival strategy that would ensure basic security needs and protection for themselves and for their children from previous marriages, if they had any. As a long term strategy it is not empowering, it creates over-dependence on the husband in a situation where men have more access to economic power” (Brown, 2014:49–50).

According to Somali women interviewed, “If a man and a woman are married, it is common for them to each have several “secret marriages” - these are approved by the Imam (religious leader), so it is halal.” Women allegedly turn to secret marriages for financial security.

### **“If you don’t have a photo on Facebook why are you hiding?”**

In addition to gossip, rumour and reputational harm online, digital security was also raised as a concern among Somali migrants interviewed. Ayan expressed, “There is the danger of chatting with someone who has a fake profile and being misled ... some people experience blackmail – they usually hide this and don’t speak out. There is a lot of fear about reputation.” Cameras and video chatting on smartphones are important tools in this context, as they allow you to confirm the identity of the person on the other side of the screen.



Abdikadir remarked in an interview that everyone should be open to post their photo and image, particularly on Facebook. "If you don't have a photo on Facebook why are you hiding?" There was, however a concern for human trafficking and coercion via the web, and particularly for young people. Another man named Nazir, in his late 20s, who studied business administration at the Cape University of Technology and now works as an accountant in Bellville, explained, "In terms of young people, smartphones and internet have become a status symbol. They are connected at an early age, so parents have less control over the type of information they access and who they are able to connect with. They may be exposed to bad content or negative influences." As noted in a blog article on this topic on the website "All Things Somali",

"Thanks to the more than two decades of conflict, every Somali has a family member or a friend living in another country. And that tightly-knit community keeps in touch through technology. With fast internet, and cheap smartphones and tablets, they are constantly in contact – liking and posting comments on each other's feeds is a new and easy way of communicating across long distances. And this makes it easier for those involved in the illicit trade of human trafficking. A smuggler doesn't need to spend much time convincing potential clients that they should risk their lives crossing an arid desert and an inhospitable sea" (All Things Somali 2015).

### **Finding Comfort and Independence through Digital Technologies**

As much as individuals that I interviewed mention the possible negative or risky consequences of digital technologies, the majority of those interviewed believe that social media is an important resource, and they recognise the value created by various platforms and services. One young woman in her early 20s who was taking English classes at the Somali Association of South Africa during the time of this research showed me photos of her friends and boyfriend on her phone, as I was assisting her sister with English tutoring at their family's home in Bellville, a two-bedroom apartment on the road adjacent to the train station. "He sent me this picture last night." I asked if he is Somali. "Yes, Somali, I know him from Bellville since 3 months." I asked if anyone knew. She said not her parents, just her sister. She showed me photos on her phone of her boyfriend, her uncle, big brother, small brother, sister and friends. "She's in Cape Town. She's in Hermanus. She's in Strand.", the young woman explained. She also showed me pictures of her friend from Kenya, sitting poised on her bed. A picture of her friend in Mogadishu was a girl dressed in black and posing in a relaxed way with her cell phone in hand. She moved effortlessly as she browsed through her phone, as if it was a part of her, and certainly contained her life's secrets.

Rangaswamy and Cutrell (2012) describe how ICT use among teenagers in a low-income urban area in India is a means of “finding comfort”, and “a way to manage and build personal technology infrastructures as an important element of conducting their own lives” (Rangaswamy and Cutrell, 2012:55). “Embodied social practices” in digital spaces (Boellerstoff cited in Horst & Miller, 2012:116), are often based on being in multiple spaces, disrupting place as an indicator of sociality and belonging, as well as time and “the metaphysics of presence” (Boellerstoff cited in Horst & Miller, 2012:117). Just as the television opened up new possibilities for new cross-cultural encounters and the transmission of ideas and values, the internet has amplified this by not only transmitting content, but placing people in particular relation to places outside their immediate locality. Youth are able to control their own (im)mobility and informational lives on and through digital technologies, a trend that has been perceived by parents in particular as “breaking apart families”, as youth are increasingly “glued to devices”, changing the dynamics of parental social control by distancing families who may be in the very same room and creating new transnational channels for discourses of “the nation” and transmission of cultural values.

### **The Internet as a Source of Support for Migrant Women**

Studies by Al Sharmani and Liberatore found that Somali migrant women actively seek religious knowledge which forms an important source of support in the context of navigating personal piety, ethics, marriage and family relationships in the context of transnational migration (Al Sharmani 2016, Liberatore 2013, 2016). This was also the case among Somali women in Bellville, who recounted following religious scholars and motivational speakers including female leaders, on online platforms like Twitter and YouTube, as a way of reflecting on and situating their own personal experiences and challenges. “Central to their cultivating Islamic knowledge and piety was questioning patriarchal norms on spousal rights, and seeking marriages that embodied Islamic virtues” (Al Sharmani 2016:36). Two women I interviewed explained that one of the main reasons they use social media is to listen to or follow the posts of Arab scholars and poets, as well as role models such as Queen Rania and the Princess of Jordan for motivational inspiration. As Al Sharmani (2016) elaborates, Somali efforts to reform marriages and families are situated in a larger context of transnational family and care, and to “confront what is perceived as the breakup of the institution of family and family norms ... and to strengthen Muslim families” (Al Sharmani, 2016:42). Liberatore situates that beyond looking at religion as a factor of integration or assimilation in a host community, it is important to look at the “experiential dimensions of engaging with Islamic revivalist knowledge: the ways in which engagements with scriptures, debates and ethical practices are crucial to processes of

ethical self-fashion" (Liberatore, 2016:53). She writes further that, "Being Muslim involves, amongst other things, the implementation of embodied religious practices centred on the fashioning of a pious self through an active engagement with an internally dynamic Islamic discursive tradition ... albeit one that is shaped and reconfigured in relation to other values, ideals, norms and practices" (ibid). Towards this, during my research I observed Sahra and Zeinab, two Somali women who I am friends with on Facebook, updating their online profiles and "checking in" to a talk by an Egyptian-American female Arab scholar taking place at the Cape Town Convention Centre. The talk was titled, "The Greatest Quest: Steps towards an Everlasting Marriage for those Married/Unmarried." The event description noted,

"We've all read the verse on countless marriage announcements. But how many have actualized it? How many of our marriages really embody that love and mercy described by Allah? What is going wrong when so many of our marriages are ending in divorce?"

The topics addressed included:

"Pre-Marriage, post-marriage;  
Successful marriage: The Missing link;  
Before and after marriage;  
Women role and responsibility;  
Bringing up kids and Family ties;  
What to expect after marriage;  
I'm married, why am I not happy?;  
The search for love.  
My marriage didn't work out, now what?"

Sahra and Zeinab were well acquainted with the speaker after having watched talks by the scholar on YouTube and reflecting with their friends on the learnings and application to personal and religious life. The internet is a source of support which can help build resilience and healing for migrant women and families, especially as migration influences the changing constitution of the family. Family relations are greatly influenced by international and national legal and social structures, including, for example, South Africa's administration of refugee rights including the right to family reunification, as explained in Chapter 4. It was explained to me that "It's typical for Somali women to have 6–8 children and they care a lot for their children, so it takes a lot of time and they are here (in South Africa) without their extended families ... If you are seen as not caring for the children and the household then the man might go get another wife." Migration has caused divorce to become fairly common amongst Somali

migrants in South Africa, and may be initiated by either the husband, wife or mutually. As Brown (2014) notes in her ethnography of women in Bellville, “Divorce or *talak* is becoming more prevalent in the Bellville community ... All respondents agreed that divorce rates have increased among the Somali community in South Africa. Various reasons were cited for this such as husbands who do not allow their wives to work, even though the family lives in poverty, shifting gender structures where women are gaining more power and polygamy” (Brown, 2014:52).

Religion is central to the shaping of the self for many migrants, and becomes a point of critical reflection in the context of family, mobility and transnationalism. This is particularly so in light of changing family structures and women’s roles and voice in society. One Somali transnational activist explained, “Gender relations in Somali culture have shifted after the civil war. Women who used to only do domestic chores are now breadwinners”. However, he continued,

“I think internet has played a role in how Somalis in the diaspora ‘share’ a more ‘modern’ lifestyle with those in Somalia. Recent Somali music from those in the diaspora is a good example – you notice a difference.”

I was shown various YouTube videos of female Somali singers, whose style of dress, dance and persona defied traditional gendered expectations of Somali women and their bodies, and were personalised in unique ways. It was explained to me that these women live in the diaspora, in places such as Germany, Canada and Sweden, allowing them to produce music and entertainment content online – practices that are considered *haraam* in Somalia. This online content, disseminated through new media channels and social media, has a significant resonance with Somali women around the world, who tune in to listen to songs which are often about love, family and personal upliftment.

Valentina Baú (2018) explores the role of digital storytelling and media participation in post-conflict countries as a means of fostering healing and reconciliation. Baú writes that the “benefits of the media’s ability to enhance individuals’ self-efficacy are particularly valuable in a post-conflict scenario, where people have experienced traumatic losses and are engaging in the effort of re-building their lives” (Baú, 2018:67). Entertainment content can be a means of sharing common emotions, expressing inter-subjectivity, and finding a means of support and healing. Similarly, Liberatore (2013) describes in her ethnography “Transforming the self: An ethnography of ethical change amongst young Somali Muslim women in London” that,

“Layla, for example, would often fall asleep at night listening to Hamza Yusuf’s talks, whereas Anisa would walk around the streets of East London with the words of Anwar Awlaki in her ears, while Nimo did the housework listening to Quranic recitation. Through these media these young women listen to English-speaking scholars from America to Saudi Arabia, reinforcing a feeling of connection to a wider transnational community of knowledge. Carrying electronic recordings, on their phones and iPods allowed them to select whichever speaker they find most emotionally engaging at a particular moment in time, thus enabling them to switch easily depending on their personal moods and tastes” (Liberatore, 2013:192).

This reflects a shift in the perception of women as creators and controllers of information. Anita Gurumurthy (2004) argues that this “not only changing the way women are talked about, but also enabling more women, particularly marginalised women, to create their own information and spread their own messages through the new ICTs” (Gurumurthy, 2004:11).

#### **Case Study: Women’s Social Capital and Safe Spaces Online**

Online communities such as *Shaax Corner* and *Araweelo Abroad* may be powerful means of building bridging social capital and unifying women in diverse geographic locations across common interests. It was explained to me that Somali women are very dependent on social networks such as other women, neighbours, others who have had similar experience and who are also raising kids. Having online and offline communities provides social and economic support for women. For example, identifying sources of funding and pooling or sharing money. This is based on trust and knowing the person and families of the lender, and is a necessity because of exclusion from financial and labour systems. Online communities are also a source of support of women’s entrepreneurial opportunities. Miryam, a Somali woman dressed in bright yellow whom I met in Bellville, explained that her husband was killed in Somalia - she made motions of a knife slicing her throat as she explained this to me. She was forced to relocate from Somalia in order to support her family. She fled to Cape Town and was able to open up a store with the support from those in her network, with whom she connected online once in Cape Town. Another woman explained the important role of such communities in sharing feelings about belonging as well as family member’s struggles with mental health.

*Shaax Corner* is allegedly the only women-only Facebook group for Somali women. The group's founder and administrators include Somali women located all over the world in Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands, the US and the UK. The founders cited in an interview that, "Everyone knows about the *Shaax Corner* worldwide. I think the reason why our group is so popular, because we gave sisters a platform where they can share their stories, experiences, opinions, seek and give advice." The *Shaax Corner* Facebook group membership includes thousands of Somali women; new members undergo a vetting process involving sending a voice note to the administrators to ensure the accounts are real and are those of Somali women. As noted by the founders of the group,

"We created a safe environment where women can speak freely and voice their opinion about diverse topics, including the controversial ones. We Somali women love to socialise and voice our opinion strongly with passion. We have lively discussions and we set boundaries for the members. So what's better than having our own 'corner' where we can discuss various topics and share our point of view" (All Things Somali 2017).

In addition to breaking the barriers that Somali women face in discussing controversial topics and expressing their lives in a semi-public forum, the group aims to "encourage fellow sisters to get the most out of themselves positively". The platform is also used as a learning, networking and self-growth platform that women make use of to expand their businesses, network with other members and get feedback on their ideas.

The online magazine and community called *Araweelo Abroad* also aims to create a safe space for Somali women around the world. The online community is named after Queen Araweelo, an ancient Somali queen who ruled around AD 15 in what would now be called Somalia. She believed in a matriarchal society and fought for the liberation of women, with females leading society and claiming decision-making positions. *Araweelo Abroad* leverages the integral part of storytelling in Somali oral culture by showcasing women's photography, poems and essays. The editors write,

"Araweelo Abroad was created to showcase and celebrate the complexity and the diversity of the Somali experience in the diaspora. We will continue to do this work and make sure that this platform remains available to all of ya'll. After all, we created it as a cyber homecoming for all Somalis: the Baati babes, our queer Somali fam, the womanists/feminists, Somali creatives and tastemakers, the ones with anti-capitalist/anti-racist politics, the religious kids, the bomb ass hijabis, transgender and gender non-conforming Somali fam, the hooyo mataalo/say wallahi gang, the commies/socialists, the indie kids, the art babes, etc" (Araweelo Abroad, 2018).

In this sense, the online magazine becomes a place of digital diaspora self-representation and negotiating inter-subjective belonging, as it is based on the online sharing of socio-political commentary as it relates to lived experiences of Somali around the world.

"*Araweelo Abroad* does not exist to legitimise the experience of Somalis in the diaspora, instead it allows multiple women to define their experiences and it evinces the existence of Somalis in the diaspora. *Araweelo Abroad* takes care of and has satisfied so many Somali women's appetites for a platform that catered to them... But the intention of *Araweelo Abroad* isn't merely representation. *Araweelo Abroad* is a publication that documents and accounts for the complexity of the Somali, Black, Muslim diasporic experiences" (Sharif 2018).

In an interview, the creator cites the need for a digital community and safe space for Somali women to guide others to find affirmation in the complexity of their identities and locate Somali feminism. It has helped Somali women overcome feelings of alienation, contradiction and being misunderstood in host countries and in local Somali diaspora communities (SOAS Radio, 2018).

As the case study above illustrates, through online communities such as *Araweelo Abroad* and *Shaax Corner* women access a safe space to freely express themselves and their flexible identities. Drawing on Appadurai, “The speed and intensity with which both material and ideological elements now circulate across national boundaries have created a new order of uncertainty in social life” (Appadurai, 1998:228). The internet is an important tool for women in the wake of social changes taking place both within the family and externally relating to the role of women in society.

It is worthwhile to note that participation in online discussion groups and social actions online may be limited to those who are already active online or in their communities, with relatively more agency and “degrees of empowerment”. Research by the World Wide Web Foundation on women’s rights online found that “cultural norms of gender and class, which consign women and the poor to subordinate roles, may pose very high barriers to women’s political activity online” (World Wide Web Foundation, 2015:41). The research in poor urban areas of nine countries found that women’s level of education, as well as offline civic and political engagement, greatly impacted on the level and quality of women’s internet access and use. These factors are “often associated with higher social status, an increased sense of self-efficacy and confidence and greater bargaining power in one’s family and community” (ibid). The report notes that these factors “strongly increased the likelihood that women would be connected and using the internet to participate in public life, to enhance economic opportunities or to expand social capital through online strategies for ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ beyond the existing limits of kin and community” (ibid). Furthermore,

“Women who have already overcome those barriers offline, by taking on active roles in community and political life, are much more likely to have the confidence to do so online. Offline agency and status is a powerful enabler of online empowerment (and possibly vice-versa). Conversely, real world and virtual experiences of exclusion and passivity may reinforce one another” (World Wide Web Foundation, 2015:41).

The possibilities afforded by digital technology for women are strongly dependent upon the individual, habitus and offline cultural factors which are reinforced in a woman’s life – rather than being a panacea or deterministic of social outcomes. Indeed, as Aisha explained to me, “A lot of women don’t want to be ‘empowered’ because they don’t know anything outside of their husband and his support to her.” The context of women’s mobility via digital technologies reflects realities that are socially, politically and historically constituted and cannot be divorced from offline experiences and political realities.



## Debates on “Good Women” and “Moral Panics”

Since the internet is a means to give women public voice and to claim space in a context where this was oftentimes previously denied, women are often the target of debates about what it means to be a “good woman”, and contestations about the social boundaries of gender norms. Though digital ethnography and observation of various online discussion forums and platforms such as Twitter, I noticed the word *ceeb* in several discussions among Somali women and activists online. I asked my Somali female friend exactly how she would define “ceeb”, which she referred to as “shame – something that is a shame to do or say”. As noted by a Somali community leader, “Two words you hear frequently as a Somali female are 'aamus' – 'be quiet' – and 'ceeb' or 'shame'” (Koumpilova, 2018).

A prominent Somali female blogger wrote on Twitter, “A broken society is result of broken homes. Our culture plays big part in reluctance to demand accountability. Everything is #Ceeb. #Somalia.” The dissolution of the state and of immediate family networks in the context of civil war and migration have influenced perceptions of women’s morality and rights. As Cawo Abdi writes in the context of Somali migrants in the United States, “Any perceived threat to the gender order (patriarchy) leads to a counter discourse aiming to bring the pendulum back to its ‘rightful’ place” (Abdi, 2014:465). In the context of Somali migrants in the US, Cawo Abdi writes,

“Somali men depict conditions in the United States as castrating ... They describe an erosion of the cultural and material bases of their authority and, hence, a menace to their gender ideals. One recurring argument illustrating this anxiety is that women’s access to independent incomes through government programs undermines men’s religiously sanctioned position as household leaders” (Abdi, 2014:467).

Indeed, as Groes and Fernandez (2018) write, “Physical, spatial and geographical movement is closely related to upward or downward social mobility, to access to jobs and opportunities, and to personal senses of fulfilment and success, or isolation and failure. Such processes are closely linked to changing notions of gender and flexible performances, and pursuits of idealised masculinities and femininities” (Groes & Fernandez, 2018:7). Indeed, “The honour of women becomes increasingly a surrogate for the identity of embattled communities of males, while their women, in reality, have to negotiate increasingly harsh conditions of work at home and in the non-domestic workplace” (Appadurai, cited in Braziel & Mannur, 2003). The transnational nature of the internet and World Wide Web allow for greater intercultural

exchange across the Somali diaspora, leading to changing views around gender norms and what constitutes *ceeb*, while also potentially leading to the guarding of women's morality.

### **Women's Awareness of Subordination May Be Heightened with Migration, but More Research Is Needed**

The difficult economic environment and threat of violence for male shopkeepers in Cape Town combined with the high demand by Somali men in South Africa for intimacy and marriage with Somali women – and women's access to financial resources through marriage – perhaps gives women a bargaining power in relationships and in society. This may influence women's ability to redefine social norms. One female interlocutor in Bellville who is unmarried expressed her demands of a marriage partner, including, "If they don't speak English, I'm not interested. And they have to have a business and money." She chuckled, "I won't date a man who has no money." As noted by Cawo Abdi, it could be that women's awareness about their subordination based on their gender may be heightened with migration, opening up new strategies for countering experiences of marginality, including financial demands and self-representation on and through technology. Cawo Abdi notes, "Before migration, Somali masculinity was intrinsically tied to men's economic roles as well as their religiously assigned position as heads of households. In America, this community's low socioeconomic status and the prominent role of the welfare regime undermines Somali men's masculinity, triggering a panic about Somali women's subversive power" (Abdi, 2014:471). Experiences of (im)mobility are situated within a political economy of migration which has cultural ramifications, influencing family, social life and gender norms. More research is needed about the gendered impacts of migration on family and cultural life.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter drew on Anderson's notion of "imagined communities" (1983) to unpack how technological innovations, and the internet and social media in particular, coupled with a history of (im)mobility and transnational diaspora have facilitated an embodied notion of transnational *soomaalnimoo* (shared Somali identity). To reiterate, ICTs assist Somali migrants to form relations both within and across borders, back to Somalia and with Somali people and others around the world. ICTs are, therefore, significant to the social engineering of everyday personal and intimate life. They provide agentive means of negotiating social relations, including those related to family, gender and citizenship. Given the reality of a mutual duality that exists between life on and offline, ICTs lead us to reconsider conceptions of social control, inter-subjective belonging and marginality surrounding multiple identities, be they

national identity, gender, age or other, in the context of nomadic subjectivities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). Group accessibility via virtual platforms creates mechanisms of belonging that transcend traditional notions of nations and borders, leading to new understandings of the intersections of citizenship, (im)mobility and belonging. Given this, there is a need to dig deeper to understanding what it means to navigate, and indeed perform, belonging via gendered technologies of mobility and citizenship, as this chapter has done.

On the positive side, approaching (im)mobility from a digital perspective yields understanding of how technology mitigates social isolation which may have lasting implications for peace, security and development, particularly in communities of diversity where mobility is a prominent feature. The internet is an important means of navigating inclusion and closeness in a world of (im)mobility and “diminishing circles of inclusion” (Nyamnjoh, 2015b) that constantly challenges people’s sense of political, economic and social belonging. Participation online affords status by way of informational capital, which is a means of negotiating belonging in multiple spaces. This disrupts notions of “being here” or “being there” as markers of inclusion and belonging. The radical participatory architecture of social media supports people to form new connections and resist traditional markers of status and belonging.

On the other hand, as this chapter has demonstrated, the online world often reproduces norms around gender, class, race and other lines of identity (Association for Progressive Communications, 2013) – leading to new forms of (im)mobility. This chapter has recognised that digital technologies and new media have the potential of creating cultural homogeneity and conformity, especially as a result of the informational architecture of social media platforms. These architectures may limit the extent to which people are able to access diverse information and networks, potentially perpetuating or even enhancing gossip, rumour and patterns of dominance through the workings of power on and through digital channels. Social worlds are magnified through digital technologies, such as social media, compounding social pressures to conform to prescribed ways of being and doing – and, indeed, reproduce culture. This speaks to Christine Hine’s important question that is: “Has it [the internet] levelled the playing field in terms of social inequality or have new forms of privilege emerged? Are we conforming more, or less, to social norms in the age of the internet?” (Hine, 2015:1).

Although, to some extent, the internet has been seen by Somalis to cause moral distress related to gender norms, it is also used by women to gain autonomy by subverting “traditional” gendered social spaces and accessing new “semi-public” spaces created through the social media. Indeed, the mobile phone is instrumental to creating a socially mobile lifestyle, which

is situated in the context of navigating pressures to conform to religious and gendered sensibilities (Lamoureaux, 2011:110).

Technological progress, although associated with modernity, does not necessarily equate to agency or rights, particularly for women, although there is a tendency to associate access to technology with empowerment. Understanding how digital technology intersects with the gender dynamics among Somali migrants in Cape Town expands our understanding of the gendered experiences of (im)mobilities, and the role of technology in navigating rights, agency and belonging through the internet and across borders.

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated that the internet is a significant sphere of transnational belonging. Indeed, ICTs create new frontier spaces, as the distinction between being online and offline and the interplay between real and virtual worlds are increasingly blurred. With this come perceptions of both positive affordances and negative consequences.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Mobility is a prominent feature of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet the mobility of people has been met with resistance by governments and in societies worldwide. While the global mobility of those with capital is often welcomed, as a claim to belonging, the mobility of those without capital is often met with distrust. International refugee laws and human rights conventions protect the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, but there are significant inadequacies in institutionalising human rights and guaranteeing access to these rights. This influences trajectories of multiculturalism and belonging, as this dissertation has explored.

Digital technologies, such as the internet, have become a lifeline for migrants in this context. The internet emerges as a force of mobility, situated in contrast to stark forces of immobility which seek to limit the movement of people. Not only does the internet close distance between geographies, it also closes distances in access to information and networks of support, such as financial assistance, social capital and caregiving.

This research has explored the significance of digital technologies, such as the internet, in the lives of Somali migrants in Cape Town to question how digital technologies intersect with (im)mobility, cultural values and local constraints to generate new forms of empowerment and marginality. Participation in social life through online networks and in transnational spaces often challenges common assumptions that identity is necessarily linked to particular places. However, this research demonstrates the ways in which borders continue to be emphasised in a world of flows. Contrary to popular assumptions that the internet is transnational, borderless and disassociated with place, this research positions that nation spaces continue to be salient within mobile communities online and offline. Indeed, new technologies that were expected to create more fluid movement and more open societies have been met with policies and social practices that encourage national borders and an obsession with confining difference (Appadurai 1998, 2008). Understanding the role of ICTs in the lives of Somali migrants in Cape Town provides a glimpse into the social significance of the internet in navigating belonging in this particular time in history in South Africa. While the internet expands access to information, facilitates social capital and extends personal autonomy, such possibilities afforded by digital technology are strongly dependent upon social, political and cultural spheres of power which are reinforced on and through digital technologies. The context of personal empowerment through digital technologies cannot be divorced from offline experiences and political realities. This includes recognising the ways in which power is exercised online, as well as the design of digital infrastructures which fuel national identity

over frontier-ness. Indeed, experiences of mobility are circumscribed and limited by new forms of social control and manipulation through social media, including corporate and government control, as well as parochial networks and cultural guardians.

This chapter will summarise the main findings presented in Chapters One to Five. It will explore the contribution to knowledge in terms of understanding articulations of belonging in a digitally mediated world of (im)mobility and social change.

### **New Analytical Approaches to Mobilities: From “Frozen” to “Frontier” Identities**

In the context of globalisation, increasing urban mobility, and rapidly transforming communities – where almost everyone has been geographically and socially displaced whether across borders or within countries – there is a great need for research not only about legal frameworks and access to human rights that reinforce articulations and experiences of (im)mobility and configurations of belonging, but also frontier experiences, as people navigate borders, rights, identity, and social and cultural belonging. This dissertation addresses this topic, drawing on ethnographic research of Somali migrants in Cape Town.

As explained in Chapter Two, the concept (im)mobility is used to highlight the innate paradoxes of mobility and immobility that emerge in the context of technology and its significance to Somali migrants. Identity emerges in a state of flux at the margins of (im)mobility – in-between physical and virtual spaces – leading to the navigation of “frontier-ness”, challenging taken-for-granted identities related to nationality, gender, ethnicity, etc. Participation in social life virtually, and through online networks, challenges the assumptions that identity is linked to particular places. This provides the foundation to understanding both frontier identities and digitally mediated belonging.

During frontier “in-between” moments in life histories, distinctive paradoxes of identity are enforced by the law and by society (e.g. being a citizen or refugee, insider or outsider, foreigner or local, even an “alien” in the US terminology). Indeed, as Pineteh (2018) highlights, “The ideology of globalisation is now defined through a set of contradictory idioms which express the fortification of national borders, protection of state resources, and citizens against those considered ‘outsiders’” (Pineteh, 2018:134). People, who are inevitably complex, are granted little opportunity or agency to contest their ascribed identities as outsiders. A “permanent victors and permanent victims” (Nyamnjoh & Brudvig, 2016:2) approach to analyses of particular races, classes, geographies, cultures and genders misses out on the “nuanced complexities and messiness of everyday lives of the social actors or artisans of that

world” (ibid). The institutionalisation of difference has led society to a point where difference has become “naturalised”. As a result, society can only see through the lens of “cultural difference”. Mobility is the way through which a society is able to access and create a “heightened tolerance” of culture and differences. However, that exposure can lead to paranoia, anxiety of demise and “violent policing of the boundaries” (Greenblatt et al, 2010:7). The inability or unwillingness of society and its institutions to transcend such categories of cultural difference translates into missed opportunities for conviviality that can be achieved when looking at the world beyond frozen identities. Going beyond social and cultural determinism can lead to a greater understanding of the complexities of circulation, interconnection and inter-subjectivity that, in practice, defy those markers of permanence which seek to silo and reign in anyone who falls in-between. Transnational influences – including new media and social networks online – play an important role in defining frontier identities.

### **Social Exclusion as a Catalyst for Transnational Engagements**

This dissertation established in Chapter Four that Somali migrants’ experiences of institutional exclusion and xenophobic violence in South Africa have led to a new manifestations of (im)mobility. The closure of critically located refugee reception offices in South Africa – compounded by the detention, deportation and criminalisation of non-nationals, and by the propagation of public xenophobic perspectives through the media – has instigated a discourse of “insiders” and “outsiders”. The concept of sovereignty, and identification of insiders and outsiders, is frequently used by countries as a protective weapon to guard against immigration and responsibilities to refugees. For example, defining refugees in a temporary status hinders access to public social services and perpetuates “foreignness”. The making of “refugees” and “migrants” is a categorical means of classification, control and containment. New paradoxes of mobility and immobility emerge as Somali refugees and migrants draw upon expansive diaspora networks and transnational communities and networks – their habitus of mobility – to navigate immobilities associated with security, home and belonging.

Chapter Four also explored the ways in which Somali migration in South Africa is characterised, paradoxically, by both violence and conviviality. Social networks, and bonding and bridging social capital, prove the resilience of migrants in the face of violence targeted specifically against Somali shopkeepers. Autonomous circles of inclusion and self-integration in specific areas of South Africa, such as Bellville, have emerged as a counter-reaction to the exclusion of Somalis from local society due to violence, to the stigmatisation of being labelled as “foreigner,” and to administrative struggles in accessing rights.

Social roots in Bellville, as in many refugee and migrant communities, are, however, often seen as transitory. Family and kinship networks maintained across a global diaspora invite aspirations of future migration, reunification with family and a “nostalgia for the future” (Piot, 2010). Personal life trajectories are often understood to be based on the possibility for imminent or future mobility. As Cawo Abdi (2015) notes in her book on the comparative experiences of Somali diaspora in Minnesota, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates, the discontent of Somalis with life in South Africa may be intensified by the imagination of what life would be like in Europe or North America. Indeed, this may be fuelled by the “desire of many Somalis in South Africa to further migrate” (Abdi, 2015:4). Expectations of future mobility help shape personal life trajectories and define de-territorialised identities. However, such hopes for onward mobility are met with a global discourse on the securitisation of migration and closure of borders. For example the 2017 United States’ travel ban has barred citizens of Somalia from entering the country, a decision which was upheld by the US Supreme Court in 2018. Thus, a combination of political instability in Somalia, social exclusion in South Africa and global immobility through the closure of national borders are catalysts for renewed transnational mobility and engagements on and through digital technologies towards this end.

### **Integration Is not a Necessary Condition of Successful Migration as Global Networks Help Define New “Diaspora Identities”**

Much of the global discourse and media attention on migration and refugees focuses on countries in Europe and North America. Integration is usually the primary means of assessing “successful” migration. This dissertation challenges and disproves these narratives. In fact, low- and middle-income countries host a majority of refugees. In 2017 the UNHCR reported that 85% of refugees are hosted in developing countries (UNHCR, 2017a). Indeed, “Some of the world’s least developed countries – Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia and Bangladesh – were among the 10 countries hosting the most refugees last year” (World Economic Forum, 2018). As one of the main economic hubs on the African continent, South Africa is a popular destination for migrants of all economic backgrounds. The International Organisation for Migration estimates that the total migrant population in South Africa rose from 2% of the population in 2000 to over 5.5% in 2015 (SA Green Paper, 2016:41).

Traditional migration discourses on “integration” may be ill-fitted to determining “successful” migration. This is particularly so in a context of limited access to rights, and where conviviality is often based on economic integration and self-reliance, achieved through entrepreneurship and diaspora networks of support, rather than social or political belonging. Although many



migrants cite economic incentives for moving to South Africa, many also choose to migrate to South Africa because of their admiration for the “rainbow nation”. The book *We Came for Mandela* illustrates such aspirations – which are often met by the reality of economic insecurity and social uncertainty associated with being a migrant or refugee in South Africa (Adams, 2001). Academic and policy debates that centre on immigrant “integration” should instead recognise the diverse ways in which migrant communities actively claim social, economic and political agency, make distinctive cultural spaces, and create the conditions for conviviality. New “diaspora aesthetics” formed as a response to (im)mobility, and in conversation with digital technologies, “interrupt cultural narratives of colonial hegemony or national singularity ... to irreversibly transform world politics and imaginaries of nationhood” (Werbner & Fumanti, 2012:151). Diaspora aesthetics capture the ways in which migrants actively and noticeably define their presence, which also redefines subjectivity.

### **ICTs Facilitate Living in “Multiple Worlds”, where Belonging is Marked by Mobile Subjectivity and “the Politics of Transfiguration”**

Digital platforms play an important role in the context of Somali mobility, especially since the movement of people worldwide has been countered by the enforcement of rigid social structures, border fortresses and shrinking civic space. Chapter Five of this dissertation demonstrated that digital technologies have created new frontier spaces where Somali migrants are able to connect with others from around the world, share aspirations and navigate new spheres of belonging. Research in Bellville, Cape Town, demonstrates that the roots in this Somali community, as in many migrant communities, are globally dispersed, with allegiances maintained across global networks and transnational channels. Belonging is marked by “hybridity”, mobile subjectivities and, as Gilroy (2005) terms, “the politics of transfiguration”. Despite a state of physical immobility and legal limbo for many Somalis migrants in Cape Town, they are nevertheless distinctly mobile – traversing historically produced and socially constituted boundaries of state, nation, and community. In many ways, the Somali community in Bellville, much like the Somali communities in Minnesota, Nairobi and other “pockets” of the Somali diaspora, is closely linked up to the global diaspora, as much as the town next door. In this context, ICTs, online news and social media become a platform and definer of shared identity. Mobile technologies have significantly increased digital access and participation. As a result, digital participation has become paramount to social belonging.

Belonging is increasingly mediated through the internet, where access to information, networks and freedom of expression create new possibilities for social organising. ICTs also encourage “bonding” and “bridging” social capital, as argued in Chapter Five. The importance

of bonding social capital and group identity becomes more salient in the context of institutional and public exclusion and the threat of violence experienced by many Somali shopkeepers in South Africa. ICTs facilitate living in “multiple worlds” through virtual access to mechanisms for inclusion in the “social” and the “political”, both of which are significant to understanding personhood and belonging. In many ways, the rise of online social networks and information capital have taken off among Somali migrants because of their tremendous social organising power in the absence of formal institutions, limited legal and social assimilation in host countries, and in the context of vastly integrated transnational diaspora networks which sustain economic and social lives.

Digital platforms mediate access to a transnational diaspora for mobile Somalis, providing a means for sharing Somali heritage and creating new pathways for being Somali in the context of a history of (im)mobility. Things like “checking in” on social media and selfies create a “spatial self”, which continues to be an important marker of belonging, and to situate inclusion in communal knowledge and shared history. The internet and social media are critical extensions of cultural life for Somali migrants, where affiliation to “home” cultures continues to play an important role in the navigation of identity. These factors mediate the experience of “being Somali” in South Africa today. Oftentimes, these new national cartographies and “imagined communities” challenge traditional notions of citizenship as linked to particular places. National cartographies of belonging online are significant when rights to inclusion and belonging are constrained in “actual” nation-places of daily life.

Chapters Four and Five argued that experiences of mobility have been both empowering and liberating, but they are also circumscribed and limited by new forms of social control and manipulation at all levels of society. This extends from political statements by leaders alienating non-nationals; to refugees’ interactions with government bureaucracy in navigating legal status; to accessing rights; to navigating the public sphere; and interacting with one’s own and other communities on social media. At the same time, despite the profoundly transnational and borderless context of the internet, “traditional” cultural identities, such as nationality and gender, continue to be salient markers of online identity, just as they are offline.

### **Amplifying Women’s Voices is Critical to Understanding Social Dynamics**

Women’s voices and perspectives in research on mobility and in technology studies are often absent. Chapter Five has reflected on women’s perspectives which I sought to understand through ethnographic research methods, as detailed in Chapter Three on methodology. Amplifying women’s voices is critical to an understanding social dynamics and society more

broadly. Additionally, researching the social reproduction of gender on and through technology has proven valuable to unearthing new insights on gendered perspectives of (im)mobility.

Chapter Five has demonstrated the ways in which Somali women, whose mobility and identity are often constrained by dominant gender norms, are able to extend their social worlds via ICTs. Use of the internet and social media offers a new channel to circumnavigate and challenge traditional gender norms and expectations of women. This has empowered women in their access to information and participation in the public sphere. In particular, social media have enabled more women to create information and spread their own messages through ICTs. Notably, online communications are autobiographical, giving virtually anyone a voice and platform to represent themselves outside of dominant narratives and spaces. This, in turn, may build self-confidence and new opportunities for social engagement. Digitally transmitted information affords status by ways of informational capital, which is a means of negotiating belonging in multiple spaces, while disrupting the notion of physical presence as a marker of inclusion.

Contrarily, Chapter Five also presented how the internet has created new channels for the “policing” of social reproduction and moralities, which has a notable impact on women. Culture, as a “disciplinary technology”, is used to create order, and perceived threats to the cultural order often lead to a counter discourse. This dissertation sheds light on the gendered complexities of (im)mobility and belonging through the lens of technology. In this context, this dissertation has argued that it is important to understand how digital technologies intersect with specific dimensions of culture, gender and social norms offline and online among diverse communities in order to build social and technological architectures that support collective voice, new configurations of agency and empowerment.

### **Digital (Im)mobilities**

Networks of social capital, supported by digital technologies, offer new channels for micro-convivial encounters, which can enhance personal networks, economic interdependency, personal autonomy and political representation. The increasing spread of internet connectivity and the widespread use of mobile phones has narrowed distance and fostered cultures of conviviality. The spectrum of opportunities offered by ICTs to support participation in social life from afar is perhaps the most significant feature, driven primarily by the mobile phone. As Ling and Horst (2011) note, “Seen through the lens of power, the mobile phone changes the rules regarding who can interact with whom” (Ling & Horst, 2011:370). This feature has become particularly significant in the context of a “world of flows” (Appadurai, 1990), in which

the ubiquity of mobility (in people, things and information) creates new prospects for social relations and conviviality across time and space (Adey, 2010).

However, digital technologies are not a panacea. As this research has shown, socialisation online also works to reinforce the status quo and, as boyd<sup>3</sup> argues, ICTs reflect “the good, bad and the ugly” (boyd, 2017). New forms of censorship emerge when information is only accessed through a “walled garden” of social media channels, which, through their architectural design, often perpetuate “ideological homophily” (Bakshy et al, 2015, Tufekci, 2015), rumour, gossip and misinformation. This has the potential to amplify what Snel et al (2016) refer to as “reactive transnationalism” – a paradoxical outcome, in which “local” social worlds become partially maintained through assimilation with a diaspora of global kin (Brudvig, 2016). As technology brings the world directly into our hands, seeking to capture our attention and satisfy our personal dreams and desires, we are led towards a future in which, as Sherry Turkle points out, “Technology changes not only what we do but in how we think. It changes people’s awareness of themselves, of each another, of their relationship with the world” (Turkle, 1984:5).

### **Anthropology and New Cartographies of Human Mobility, Change and Messiness Afforded by New Technologies**

As discussed in Chapter Two on methodology, the relatively new field of digital anthropology is important to understanding social transformations afforded by new technology in contemporary societies. As Miller et al (2016) have noted, adoptions and use of the internet and social media vary considerably across countries and regions. This dissertation has provided a glimpse into the role of digital technologies in the lives of Somali migrants in Cape Town, South Africa, with the aim of contributing to theoretical debates about the digitisation of social life, and the intersection of new technologies, mobility and belonging.

By investigating this topic, this research revealed the importance of complementing “traditional” ethnography with digital ethnography, or, indeed, “digitising ethnography” through interactions via social media, analysis of digital media and online data. Drawing on the point made by Tom Boellerstoff, the digital is not always an object of study per se, but rather “a methodological approach, founded in participant observation, for investigating the virtual and its relationship to the actual” (Boellerstoff cited in Horst & Miller, 2012:13). Further, “we can no longer treat the virtual and the physical as distinct or separate” (ibid). Technology closes

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<sup>3</sup> Intentionally lower case.

the distance historically associated with anthropological studies in which the anthropologist may have travelled a far distance or even around the world to immerse him- or herself in locality or topic of study. This study presents the idea of “feminist digital ethnography” as a methodological and analytical approach to study both the adoption and use of digital technologies, on the one hand, and how virtual spaces intersect with power and agency in everyday lives to give rise to new forms of mobility and possibilities for social and political resistance, on the other hand. Feminist digital ethnography was particularly useful to a study of mobile Somali as this approach (conceptually and methodologically) recognises the ways in which identity is transnational (dispersed through nodes and nation-places) and permanently on the move as a response to unfolding experiences of layers of power, domination and resistance in everyday life. This approach is not limited to studying women or gender, but can be applied to study digital spaces as important extensions of physical spaces and places, evermore so as distinctions between being offline and online fade as our lives are increasingly mediated by digital spaces and information.

Anthropology is well suited theoretically and methodologically to help understand and narrate the “in-between” frontier spaces of history and social change in which we currently live – to unbundle the social impacts of digitisation. Furthermore, the political economy of digital data fundamentally changes the questions we need to ask about (im)mobility, identity, citizenship and belonging. I am drawn to the challenge posed by Turkle to think beyond the technical and to instead question, “What kind of people are we becoming?” Indeed, the search for comfort and predictability through machines often becomes preferable to “the sometimes messy, often frustrating, and always complex world of people” (Turkle, 2011:7). As such, anthropology has the potential to capture the emerging cartographies of human mobility, change and messiness afforded by new technologies. As with the people it studies, anthropology faces a critical window of opportunity to reinvent its own belonging in a world of technological mobility and social change.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

This research has contributed to new knowledge by situating the role of digital technologies (including the internet and social media) in relation to Somali migrants’ experiences of navigating (im)mobility and belonging in Cape Town. These are issues that have not been paired conceptually or methodologically in current research on Somali mobility and/or migration in South Africa. This study has also situated Somali experiences in a broader political landscape on migration and digitalisation to probe the reasons why technologies that were expected to create more fluid movement and more open, democratic societies have been

met with policies and practices that encourage the hardening of national borders, and a parallel rise in global trends towards anti-immigration, control of identities, fear mobility and an obsession with confining difference. The study has situated these issues within the South African context, while positioning their significance to South Africa within a global landscape.

As such, this research has explored the important intersections of (im)mobility, physical and virtual space, and new configurations of belonging in an increasingly digital world, referencing the case and experiences of Somali migrants in Cape Town. This is particularly relevant in the context of significant geopolitical changes related to both migration and technology that are sweeping the world – including public debates centred around the “refugee crisis” (De Haas, 2012; Triandafyllidou, 2018; Krzyzanowski et al, 2018) and the role of the internet in democracy and civic participation (Oyedemi, 2015; Mossberger et al, 2008). Accelerated mobility is a common feature of society today, but it has become juxtaposed by a simultaneous rise in anti-immigration sentiments and generalised fear of difference, not least in countries peopled by multiple waves of migration in the past, and that have for long been associated with a cosmopolitan “melting pot” disposition. This dichotomy of (im)mobility has become particularly pronounced in the contemporary political landscape with large-scale migrant and refugee movements in Europe, Trump’s zero tolerance policy on the Mexican border and, as this dissertation has demonstrated, the securitisation of immigration in South Africa and its lasting influence on conviviality and belonging.

As we have witnessed in recent years, social media has claimed a large influence on society – politically, economically and socially. The deep influence of the internet and social media has been particularly evident within the political landscape since 2016, when the extent to which the internet could be co-opted by governments to manipulate articulations of citizenship and belonging became blatantly evident. This point was revealed by the controversy on how Russia influenced the 2016 United States presidential election remotely by taking advantage of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, along with their paid advertising platforms (Morgan, 2018; Doshi et al, 2018; Narayanan et al, 2018).

Beyond the political influence of digital technologies and platforms on society, we have also seen how the design of technological architectures may reinforce the encoding of social hierarchies. Online platforms are sustained by data footprints which are used to code and categorise us into inflexible boxes of nationality, gender, race, class, caste, income and other prescribed categories. Through society’s hyper-use of digital mediums, we are on the path to “being” digital, as a “normative rationality” – providing the basis of what it means to be a full citizen (in terms of access to and participation in the public sphere), and determining the

“rationality” of modern social life. This is an issue of concern because – as this dissertation has argued – claims for belonging are often made within the framework of the nation, and are based on a range of identity factors including race, religion, ethnicity, gender, clan or language. Reinforcement of the “nation” through digital means may lead to greater immobility and inflexibility of identities, and of institutions, because as Schou and Hjelholt argue, “Being digital is constructed as the proper mode of citizen-subjectivity” (Schou and Hjelholt, 2018:514). Indeed, as Ruppert, Isin and Bigo have argued, “data has a performative power that is resignifying political life. That is, data politics is concerned with not only political struggles around data collection and its deployments, but how data is generative of new forms of power relations and politics and different and interconnected scales” (Ruppert et al, 2017:2).

The ingraining of identity (and identity politics) through data-driven indicators of belonging online, combined with technological architectures which reinforce social and informational bubbles, may lead to greater socio-economic and spatial distancing of people based on economic status, race, ethnicity, gender, language, etc in the new online/offline public sphere. Indeed, one has limited capacity to define oneself outside of boxed categories of belonging, and technology is limited in its ability to capture and code expression, emotion and nuances: the “in-between” and “in-process” of thought, language and persona – all of which are important to navigating belonging. In this “winner takes it all” landscape, digital algorithms define how people may access information, services, institutions and each other based on their online profile. This has been shown by Safiya Noble (2018) to perpetuate racism and sexism through “algorithms of oppression” (Noble, 2018). Noble’s analysis of “data discrimination” challenges the popular notion that search engines deliver an equal playing field for diverse identities and ideas (Noble, 2018).

The case of Somali migrants in Cape Town demonstrates that, for Somalis, being mobile pre-dates the collapsing of geographies on the internet. Online mobility – characteristic of the era of globalisation – is historically situated in political and technological systems, architectures and cultures of “modernity”. We have seen how the internet creates new avenues for social connection, but it also bolsters and disguises new avenues for control, bounded existence and immobilised identities. This study has investigated Somali mobility in its gendered form in a world of digital technology and social media, situating the “Somaliness of Being” in Cape Town, and in this era of “modernity”. In many ways, the “modern” world of social media is barely catching up with Somalis and their historical social conventions of mobility, news, networking, hospitality and community. This study serves as a reminder of the complex and flexible realities of Somalis as “nimble footed” and “navigators and negotiators of various identity margins” (Nyamnjoh, 2013b:110). There is a tendency to oversimplify Somali people,

especially as governments create artificial borders for political reasons; and as the policing of national identities becomes engrained in migration policy and citizenship practices. As this study of Somali (im)mobility and digital technologies argues, creating conditions for agency and empowerment in the digital world relies on understanding articulations of belonging as being based on flexibility and identities on the move.



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